

Homemade Matters: Logics of Opposition in a Failed Food Swap

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ABSTRACT

A rich literature on commensuration and standards of evaluation has yielded important findings on how items are valued. Over the course of a two-year ethnography, we witnessed one effort to create a new economic practice—a monthly swap of “homemade food”—start promisingly but ultimately fail as participants were unable to reach consensus on valuations. They rejected each other’s offerings on numerous grounds, including proximity to industrial food, packaging, and excess “artisanal-ness” and alterity, forcing participants to “thread the needle” in search of acceptable qualities. Multiple or competing logics can be reconciled with clear institutional definitions, by using money, or via relational work. In our site, none of these mechanisms were operative. Instead, a multivalent alternative identity biased toward oppositional criteria impeded valuations and robust exchange. We believe this problem is common to a larger class of organizations that define themselves in opposition to the dominant market.

KEYWORDS: money; inequality; evaluation; circuits of commerce; sharing economy.

On a Sunday afternoon, in a neighborhood of a large Northeastern city filled with revitalized wharfs and warehouses, a group of approximately 20 people gather in a rented room. The action begins with participants walking around and sampling foods, followed by a silent auction as people make offers for exchanges. After all the bids are entered, trades begin. No money will change hands, but soon food will circulate throughout the group.

This is a typical scene at the Northeastern Food Swap, an informal “sharing economy” initiative that has operated since 2011. Food swaps began in Brooklyn in 2010 and quickly spread. In 2013, 123 swaps were reported across the United States and Canada (Winterman 2013). Food swapping is a type of activity that economic sociologists have called a “circuit of commerce,” a concept developed by Viviana Zelizer (2004, 2010) to describe economic exchanges and social relations that are neither traditional firms nor markets. Over the course of a two-year ethnography, we observed our research site devolve into a failed attempt at what we have called a “circuit in construction” (Dubois, Schor, and Carfagna 2014), an attempt to create, *de novo*, ongoing socially meaningful exchange relationships among a group of largely unrelated people. After beginning with enthusiasm and excitement,

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this swap struggled to establish itself as a viable site of either economic exchange or social connection. By the end of the second year, it was barely functioning.

As barter economies, food swaps represent an attempt to remove some food provisioning from the cash market, with swappers adhering to a relatively fixed one-to-one exchange ratio: a jar of jelly yields a jar of pickles. The lack of cash makes this an unusual case as relational economic sociologists have primarily analyzed situations where cash enters areas of social life. These studies reveal context-specific, relationally determined meanings of exchange, and challenge classical views of money as a universal leveling agent (Zelizer 1989). By examining a site where individuals have removed money from exchange, and where social negotiations failed to produce consistent standards of exchange, we aim to complicate these interpretations.

The food swap is a place to trade homemade foods. Despite the ostensibly straightforward meaning of “homemade,” criteria for evaluating offerings were diverse and often obscure. Participants’ competing understandings of the purpose and practices of this emergent circuit thwarted the development of common systems of evaluation and accounting. Rather than finding easy avenues for trading foods brought to the swap, participants found exchanges failed to materialize. Members rejected foods for many reasons; prominent among them were that offerings were taboo or profane, quotidian, or excessively “alternative.” The proliferation of competing standards of evaluation contributed to unclear boundaries of circuit membership—particularly without money to equilibrate offerings. In our case, the result was uncertainty about what type of food—and what type of person—was welcome at the swap.

We believe this case contributes to the growing literature on evaluation and commensurability in economic life. In previous research, sociologists have found that multiple or competing logics can be reconciled in at least three ways: with clear institutional definitions and boundaries, by using money, or via relational work. In our case, the first two were unavailable. The food swap is a barter economy. As a new organization, the swap could not rely upon past institutional work to create common standards. Relational work would have been the obvious route for reconciling multiple logics to negotiate common evaluative criteria, but the kinds of relations required did not develop—even among a relatively homogeneous group of participants.

What accounts for this failure, especially in light of intentions to create new relationships and practices? We argue an important part of the answer lies in the larger context of our case, namely the emergence of “new economy” institutions, such as the sharing economy, cooperatives, and gift economies, animated by a rejection of dominant market structures. The food swap is situated within one of the most successful of these challenges—alternative food movements challenging the agro-industrial food regime. To a significant extent, the swap was founded with an oppositional identity, defining itself *against* both the normative food system and culturally valorized artisanal alternatives. For that reason, members found it easier to articulate negative criteria, i.e., categories of foods that should not be offered rather than robust standards for valued items. Faced with multiple exclusionary criteria, successful swappers needed to “thread the needle” to avoid numerous undesirable qualities in their offerings.

Ultimately, a failure to articulate what qualities and characteristics *were* consistently acceptable contributed to the swap’s demise. We believe that this bias toward broadly “oppositional criteria” characterizes a larger class of organizations in the new economy sector, many of which also define themselves in opposition to the dominant market (Schor and Fitzmaurice 2015; Schor et al. 2016), and suggest this may be a factor in their limited success.

THE CASE: FOOD SWAPS IN THE NEW SHARING ECONOMY

Food swaps are a part of what has been termed the “sharing economy”: a constellation of digitally mediated platforms and face-to-face initiatives providing novel modes of provisioning. While the sharing economy has common features, such as digital technology and peer-to-peer structure, it is also

diverse (Schor and Fitzmaurice 2015). It has also generated considerable controversy (Schor 2014) with critical accounts contending that the for-profit platforms are extensions of the neoliberal economic project (Dawkins 2011). For smaller peer-to-peer/nonprofit platforms, questions include their ability to retain members, expand, and facilitate robust, networks of exchange (Bellotti et al. 2014; Schor et al. 2016).

While sharing economy platforms are attracting significant venture capitalist funding and attention, numerous alternative nonprofit, peer-to-peer initiatives facilitating non-monetized sharing have also been emerging on this new frontier of consumer culture. The expansion of some of these initiatives, such as Freecycle—an organization that facilitates gift exchanges of unwanted goods—would suggest success. Freecycling claims eight million users across 85 countries (Arsel and Dobscha 2011). However, the limited literature on these alternative initiatives suggests many are struggling. Time banking initiatives have suffered when needed services are unavailable (or valuable services are withheld). Often, participants frame their involvement in these initiatives as “volunteering,” leading to transaction imbalances that undermine exchange and long-term trading relations (Bellotti et al 2014; Dubois et al. 2014; Seyfang 2004). Even the relative success of Freecycling has been fraught with “[mismatches] between the institutionally imposed norms and community participation” (Arsel and Dobscha 2011). Furthermore, this landscape is littered with numerous failed attempts: Landshare, which paired landowners and gardeners has closed down. Yerdle, a sophisticated gift economy, has shuttered its site. So too have a number of the neighborhood goods exchange and loaning platforms.

Food swaps are peer-to-peer/nonprofits. They are in-person events where participants exchange foods that they have made, grown, or foraged. A common form is a weekly or monthly gathering—generally of 50 or fewer participants. Exchanges follow a silent auction format with written bids placed on items. After a period of sampling and discussion, participants signal their willingness to exchange by signing the bid sheet in front of the desired item. This written form coordinates exchanges and intentionally reduces the chances of face-to-face rejection. Participants select the offers they intend to accept, and attempt to finalize them in person.

Food swaps are empirically interesting because they explicitly focus on expanding access to “real,” homemade foods and providing alternatives to the exchange relations of the dominant market. No money is used, eliminating prices as a parsimonious way to assess the value of the goods. Moreover, exchanges are typically one-item-to-one-item, limiting flexibility in trading ratios. As a result, we expected uncertainty and even ongoing negotiations about standards of evaluation and the meanings of exchange, especially in the early months. Furthermore, because of the structure of the swapping process, the dynamics of creating alternative systems of evaluation and commensurability would be observable, occurring in real time.

Food swaps also provide a theoretically interesting case because food is a multivalent cultural object: the same food is capable of reflecting numerous meanings and associations across contexts (Jordan 2007). As a source of sustenance, food reproduces the meanings and separations between home and the market (Moisio, Arnould, and Price 2004). Food is also a means of distinction and a pathway to valorized experiences (Johnston and Baumann 2007). Increasingly food has also become a privileged mode of expressing and embodying environmental concerns. However, in a context like a swap, attributes of food—like many secondhand goods—ensure leftovers cannot be exchanged without significant cultural work (Setiffi 2011). In the absence of monetary measures of value, how do the items at a food swap get evaluated? And when do those evaluations, and the boundaries of worth they construct, foster or inhibit trades and the successful operation of an alternative economy?

IN FOR A PENNY, IN FOR A POUND: ESTABLISHING VALUE IN ECONOMIC EXCHANGE

Developing consistent standards evaluation and commensurability typically requires some combination of money, institutional work, or ongoing relational negotiations. We begin with the first, money.

While recognizing that money is a reflection of specific social relations, early sociological approaches viewed money as uniformly homogenizing and rationalizing in its effect. For Max Weber and Karl Marx, money was an engine of rationality (Weber 1978), masking the social relations of the economy and alienating the individual and society through its ability to subsume social life under the framework of rational, calculative exchange (Marx [1884] 1978:105). For Georg Simmel (1978), willingness to exchange objects produced their economic value. Money served as a perfect facilitator of exchange, as it could ground subjective measures of worth and comparative relationships between differing values in an objective, yet abstract, means of accounting based on quantity—a universal measuring rod of worth.

In contrast, recent relational approaches in economic sociology are more in the spirit of Emile Durkheim, who argued that it was not the inherent character of money that gave it its power, but the social and moral orders in which money was embedded (see Deflem 2003:84). Contemporary approaches highlight how the functions of money are contextually negotiated, the ways money is integrated into social relationships without uniformly rationalizing them and stripping them of sentiment, and how the meanings of money are defined differently across social settings (Radin 2001; Spar 2006; Zelizer 1989, 2010).

The barter economy of the Northeastern Food Swap is what Zelizer calls a “circuit of commerce.” Circuits are a distinct means of organizing economic activity, differentiated from other social networks along five criteria: social ties among a group of individuals, economic exchanges stemming from those relationships, a common system of evaluation and accounting, shared meaning attached to the exchanges, and a boundary defining membership in the circuit (Zelizer 2010:304). Beyond these criteria, there are numerous issues about how circuits operate, including identifying the conditions under which circuits fail, despite participants’ concerted efforts. To illuminate conditions of failure, we begin with the question of valuation.

Typically, exchange is facilitated by stable category meanings that enable valuation (DiMaggio 1987; Zuckerman 1999). As categories become established and familiar, expectations for what fits within a category become more precise (Fiske and Taylor 1991; Khaire and Wadhvani 2010), further facilitating market actors’ ability to assess commensurability, relative value, and worth (Zhao 2005). These category definitions shape actors’ perceptions of commensurability (Espeland and Stevens 1998), and failure to conform to categorical expectations can stifle exchange (Zuckerman 1999). Within circuits, processes of valuation are key. Shared standards for evaluating objects, transactions, and trading partners shape exchange, as actors work to match repertoires of evaluation and engagement with particular relations (Wherry 2012). When actors draw on disparate framings, or fail to adhere to collective understandings, commensuration can be fraught.

Historically, the literature on institutions has emphasized how conformity is created within organizations (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). More recently scholars have analyzed the coexistence of multiple logics of action (Hsu and Hannan 2005; Rao and Giorgi 2006). These perspectives argue that individuals draw from culture as a resource to determine appropriate modes of interaction and judgments of worth within different settings (Rao and Giorgi 2006). Often, these differing logics are in conflict, causing actors uncertainty (Thornton and Ocasio 2008). However, the persistence of multiple logics is more likely when an institutional setting provides a framework for their integration. While the coexistence of multiple logics can provide opportunities for innovation and flexibility it also complicates clear categorization. As organizations try to meet conflicting audience demands, failure becomes more likely (Hsu and Hannan 2005; Zuckerman et al 2003).

These findings offer possible insights into circuit formation generally, and our case particularly. When circuit constructors are attempting to counter dominant socio-cognitive categories or bases of valuation in a society, even more work is required to establish what is valued and why. In this case, and others like it (Attwood-Charles and Schor 2017; Schor et al. 2016), circuits in construction may have difficulty establishing a common basis for commensurability among competing logics.

One explanation for such failure is that standards of evaluation are also key to maintaining social boundaries (Bourdieu 1984), and evaluative judgments serve as powerful sources of group identity (Lamont and Molnar 2002:168). For Bourdieu, a key distinction is provided by “distaste,” or the rejection and devaluation of the goods or practices of the “other” (Bourdieu 1984; Wilk 1997). As a result, circuit functioning requires that inequality and power differences are managed, which occurs partly through members’ acceptance of shared evaluations of social and economic exchanges (Hoang 2015; Mears 2011). Early research on more alternative initiatives in the sharing economy suggests a paradox: formal commitments to openness are undermined by a heightened reliance on distinguishing practices for structuring exchange (Schor et al. 2016).

However, even in the absence of inequality, establishing common standards of evaluation is difficult. Evaluation has been described as a two-stage process: an object must be classified as belonging within a category before fine-grain differences (in quality, uniqueness, or merit) are determined (Phillips and Zuckerman 2001; Zuckerman 1999). Given that categorical identities are rule like, there is always a balance between conformity and differentiation; distinctiveness, almost by definition, plays an ancillary role (Zuckerman 2016). Certainly, unique identities are possible—actors can challenge expectations by recruiting alternative logics; however, success is often predicated on the exploitation of political openings and the creation of organizational structures that mobilize alternative logics (Rao and Giorgi 2006).

Balancing these two evaluative tendencies proved very challenging in the food swap, complicated by the nature of the gastronomic field in which the swap is situated. This field is increasingly characterized by alternative food systems and economic entities, which means it is rife with oppositional cultural logics that can be invoked to categorize and evaluate food. The relationship between the swap and other alternative food system practices was readily apparent: swappers talked about “food miles,” organic subscription farms they belonged to, preferences for local foods, and making things “from scratch.” The swap was intended by its founders to make supporting local farmers easier for urbanites like themselves, who valued seasonal food but still wanted a diverse pantry. These logics were situated within the broader alternative food movement, opposing unsustainable production (Carfagna et al. 2014), unhealthy foods (Guthman 2011), artificial additives (DuPuis and Gillon 2009; Weber, Heinze, and DeSoucey 2008), and an increasingly globalized food system (Allen 2004).

On the other hand, swappers also rejected certain market responses to the industrial food system, in particular what they saw as foodies’ preoccupation with artisanal production (Ocejo 2014). Contemporary foodies also valorize cuisines, production practices, and food items based on binary oppositions: in this case opposition to the homogenizing influence of mass production and the Eurocentrism of gastronomy. Authenticity has become a dominant basis for classification in this world, set against the ever-present foil of the *inauthentic*. Two types of authenticity have been identified: categorical (being true to socially constructed specifications, not watered down in a quest for profits) and moral (the result of “pure” motives by producers) (Carroll and Wheaton 2009). Foodies also valorize items constructed as exotic (foods that violate norms, or originate in faraway places). Taken together, these logics have led to an emphasis on artisanal production (Johnston and Baumann 2007, 2010; Ocejo 2014)—on foods symbolically set apart as alternatives to the mass-produced and the mundane. While food swappers sought an antidote to mass production, they also rejected logics of artisanal production. As we demonstrate, the rarified skills of the artisan are at odds with an alternative food system where everyday people can “take back their pantries” through home cooking. Because swappers’ logics excluded both the products of the dominant food system and important types of marketed alternatives to it, they were left with a razor thin margin for defining home-made food. While they could articulate what was excluded, they struggled to fill the category by articulating positive definitional requirements. And so, the food swap collapsed.

This failed case is informative both for its contribution to the circuits literature and the literature on alternative economic arrangements (Emigh 1997). With respect to the former, we define failure by two measures. The first is economic—if individuals are routinely unable to access desired goods

or services within a circuit, it is not functioning effectively. In our analysis, we consider successful and unsuccessful transactions, illuminating the competing logics underlying participants' actions. Second, circuits are distinguishable by their strongly social nature (Zelizer 2010). If a circuit is unable to routinely foster desired social relations, its success is jeopardized.

Moreover, this particular circuit represented an effort to construct an alternative economy of food provisioning. As a result, this failed case reveals a set of conditions under which oppositional identities do not generate strong categorical definitions and—perhaps more importantly—clear criteria for inclusion and membership. The literature contains numerous cases in which successful categories *are* created on the basis of oppositional/alternative identities (Carroll and Swaminathan 2000; Weber et al. 2008). Indeed, food swapping itself is part of a broader cultural interest in alternative food systems, many of which are highly successful. However, given our finding that an oppositional identity undermined the swap's success, we show that the dominant institutional fields against which economic innovations are developed can cast a long shadow. In our case, evaluative criteria were so heavily structured by opposition that it was hard to establish positive expectations for guiding exchange. Particularly in the absence of money, alternative economies shoulder a heavy burden for creating new standards of value. As a result, this failed case is also a contribution to the literature on progressive economic alternatives to global capitalism (Wright 2010; Gibson-Graham 2006). As alternative modes of production and consumption become ever more widely available on the market, new economies may increasingly be faced with the task of threading an oppositional needle—and saddled with difficulties that arise when building an identity distinct from both the dominant market and its most successful and celebrated alternatives.

METHODS

Our research is based on two years of participant observation at the Northeastern Food Swap, primarily by the first author. As a participant, he attended monthly swaps, bringing food items to exchange. Swaps lasted approximately 3 hours, resulting in approximately 80 hours of observations. The first author also conducted six semi-structured interviews, each approximately one-hour in length, which were recorded and transcribed. Informal interviews were also conducted in the course of participant observation and these conversations were recorded in field notes following each swap.

Participants in the swap were demographically homogenous. All but one of the regular participants were women. Attendees were also overwhelmingly white. Of the swap's regular members, there was one African American woman and one East Asian man. Participants were mostly in their late 20s to late 30s. Nearly all were college educated, employed professionals. Those who were not working were overwhelmingly enrolled in graduate school, with the exception of a few stay-at-home mothers and one retired individual. Nearly all of the participants also presented themselves as embedded in the food world, referencing popular food blogs they frequented and their opinions on the latest food trends.

All data was inductively analyzed following a narrative analysis approach. New hypotheses emerged over the course of the research (Fetterman 1998). We sensed that the exchange networks within the swaps were rather bounded, making it difficult for newcomers to break in. We realized there were several standards for evaluating food, such that not every new participant's offerings were considered trade-worthy. Over the course of our fieldwork we observed the members of the food swap struggling to develop characteristics of a functioning circuit. Most importantly, a consensus on what was valued seemed particularly hard to find and ultimately led to declining participation.

STRUGGLES FOR EQUIVALENCE: COMMENSURABILITY AND CIRCUIT FAILURE

Food Swap Matches: What Makes a Successful Offering?

The currency of the food swap was homemade food; however, not all homemade products were the basis of a "good" trade. As one participant explained at an early swap, special items made for the

swap could be sampled during the event and forgotten. Although she thought it was exciting to get to try a delicious homemade truffle at the swap, it was “just a treat.” When she was considering trading partners she was looking for something that she could use in her daily life. Items like jam, pickles, bread, and granola were more desirable than cookies, cupcakes, or candies. Good trades were based on foods, such as seasoned breadcrumbs or homemade extracts, which could be integrated into daily routines, used repeatedly, or could serve as the basis for cooking something new.

We tested such criteria by bringing two sets of items to each swap. A batch of made-from-scratch “Oreo” cookies (labeled “homemade Oreos”) was not terribly successful but a watermelon gazpacho, packed in a mason jar that could be taken to work for lunch or eaten at home, received the most bids of any item. Offerings originally made as a part of a participant’s life outside of the swap generated even greater interest. A young newly-married couple—both PhD candidates—were the object of considerable favorable attention when they brought pear butter they made as wedding favors. One swapper described that she traded with the couple because she felt the pear butter gave her a chance to share in a special part of their life. These strongly social aspects, such as a connection to life outside the swap or an alteration in one’s own personal life, were one criterion for a good trade.

However, participants were forced to walk a fine line to secure trades. Items had to possess a certain “everyday” appeal. But successful members typically put far more than an everyday level of effort into their products. By making food themselves, swappers described feeling productive and gaining control. The ethos of the swap was described by co-founder Shauna—a 34-year-old lawyer—as one in which people are encouraged to “take back their pantries.” Shauna saw the food swap as a means of “empowering [others] to be self-sufficient.”

Among swappers, this desire for self-sufficiency served to valorize manual labor as a valuable consumer practice in its own right (Carfagna et al. 2014). Anne, a freelance journalist and another co-founder, described making her own pesto:

And then also, you know, there’s the satisfaction in me, you know, washing the basil and putting it in a food processor with parmesan cheese and—I used walnuts instead of pine nuts ‘cause that’s what I had—and there’s sort of a satisfaction to, like, me actually, literally making the basil [pesto] instead of, like, scooping it out of a can.

Swappers consistently expressed an appreciation of practicality as a standard for value. Shauna described the swaps as, “about people cooking in their house and, like, feeding themselves.” The reality, however, is that the types of items participants sought out for trades—like canned jams and canned pickles—take far more time and specialized knowledge to produce than most people use in everyday cooking. Moreover, the participants who were best able to secure trading partners often spent more time and attention time placing their items in attractive packaging. Items in Ziploc bags, Tupperware, or reused packaging from store-bought products were often rejected. The gold standard of containers was invariably the trendy Mason jar—especially those outfitted with attractive labels. Canning jars, as a technology enabling sterilization for *home* food preservation (Kelly 2015), could serve as both a marker of a food’s homemade character and as means, both real and symbolic, of decontaminating the foodstuffs within.

Even if items were not particularly time consuming to make, participants sought out carefully sourced ingredients. Anne described her attraction to local products: “And it also ties into, sort of, the trend of people are canning and they care more about how their food is sourced and, you know, like, going to farms and picking their own produce is kind of trendy, too.” Lidia felt envious of the experiences of swappers from the suburbs who had their own farms or gardens, and wished she could afford to shop at farmers’ markets since the quality and taste of the food is “so much better.” Similarly, Anne described how getting to know a farmer was an exciting experience for a “city girl” who is “not cut out” for farming. With clear satisfaction in her voice, Anne explained, “I will say that, so, I know someone who is a farmer—which fascinates me ‘cause I’m a city girl, so we don’t meet

many people who are actually, literally farmers.” Eating “local” food was cast as a way of gaining access to the valorized experiences of others. As a result, items like a homemade grape jelly made from grapes the participant grew in their own backyard, or even a simple basil pesto made with home-grown basil, were very popular.

Participants also liked to trade for items they thought were more interesting than what they could find in the grocery store or would think to make themselves. One regular swapper routinely advised newcomers to avoid items that “anyone could make.” “I wouldn’t recommend bringing brownies,” she would say, “I mean, unless they are like the best brownies ever. But everyone here can make brownies if they want them.” Far from efficiently using excess “homemade” food, “homemade” is reimagined as something made in the home especially for the swap. At the annual holiday cookie swap, we asked the regulars how they would decide among the hundreds of cookies. Almost all indicated that would trade for “something interesting” or “not just your average chocolate chip.” Popular items at regularly scheduled swaps were “plum vermouth jam,” a sweet tomato basil jelly, or a blood orange cocktail mixer.

In talking to members about what they looked for in a good trade, time and again a lime marmalade from one of the first events was cited as the ideal item. Homemade food had to be distinctive yet conceivably part of one’s routine life and cookery—consistent with theories of two-stage valuation that emphasize the advantage of broad conformity within a category along with seemingly authentic distinctiveness (Zuckerman 2016). The lime marmalade became the benchmark of a good trade because it represented an item that could be consumed simply and repeatedly with breakfast and is something seemingly anyone could produce. At the same time, it was both involved and innovative enough that very few people would actually make it.

The Collapse of the Food Swap

In its early months, when we began studying it, the swap was thriving. On the heels of a positive report in a local newspaper, attendance was high—averaging 25 to 30 participants. The organizers were self-funding the swap, paying to rent a room in a co-working space that served as an incubator for area nonprofits in a gentrifying neighborhood. After a year, participation began to lag (see Figure 1). Swaps were drawing eight to ten participants, and the organizers were tiring of paying for the space. They relocated to a different co-working office across town in another trendy neighborhood filled with boutique shops and restaurants. The first swap in the new location only drew a handful of participants—largely the eight or so who had previously been in attendance. Over the course of that summer, the numbers continued to dwindle. At one swap, the three organizers—themselves longtime friends—sat at a table socializing amongst themselves. Three newcomers mingled awkwardly on the margins: two of them came together, while the third was unable to make anything but a single trade.

During the second year in operation, the swap continued to struggle. Cancellations became routine, coming with as little as 24-hours-notice. At an August swap, only one other individual showed up. Standing outside of the venue, we contacted one of the organizers. The swap had been cancelled, but the announcement was only made via the swap’s twitter account. The lone participant was upset. “What, do I have to get a twitter account just to be a member?” she fumed. That was her last swap.

Over this period there were some upticks, but attendance was never stable. Many of the original members stopped participating. Lidia, who had been an early and devoted attendee, returned after six months and was welcomed with much excitement. As we left the venue, she expressed her frustration with the swap’s inability to attract enough members to make it worth attending. She was unhappy with the organizers’ failure to explain what the swap was all about, saying the website lacked clear enough suggestions about what types of foods people should bring, did not instruct newcomers to bring samples, or even suggest the appropriate size packaging for items to ensure equivalence.

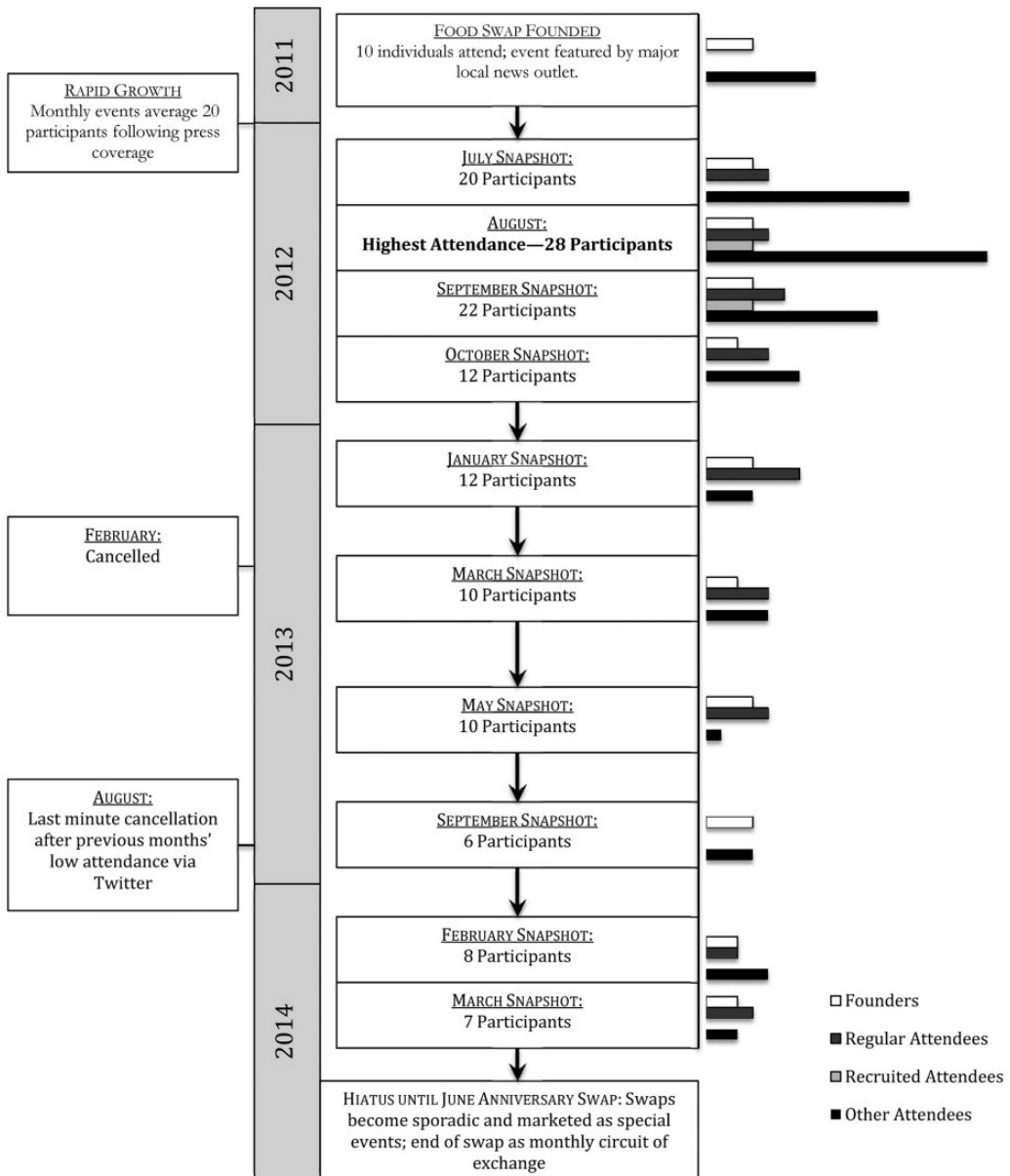


Figure 1. A Food Swap's Decline: Changing Attendance Rates and Composition

First-timers would often leave saying things like, “at least now we know what not to make,” or “at least *someone* wanted my food,” They struggled with the lack of clarity about what was valued as homemade food. Most would not return.¹

Participants often brought different understandings of the purpose of the swap, leading to contradictory expectations that stifled long-term membership. These mismatches in understandings also

1 Such problems are certainly not unique to our case. While maintaining an online presence, the Northeast Indiana Food swap ceased operation after struggling to retain members, despite ample press coverage, publicity, and outreach. The problem received attention in a recent book targeting would-be swappers and swap organizers, highlighting the struggles many swaps have to retain members, and suggesting membership fees as a way of possibly instilling commitment in members (Paster 2016).

contributed to the instability of the circuit, as swappers drew boundaries between themselves and those who were operating with different motives. A more fundamental problem was the presence of competing standards of evaluation. Our data demonstrate the ways in which actors, who were remarkably homogenous in terms of gender, race, and cultural capital, drew on often-contradictory cultural logics to assess potential exchanges.

These evaluations were predicated on negative criteria, shaped by logics that devalued qualities and practices of the broader food system as undesirable or problematic. However, many of these negative criteria are multivalent: the binary oppositions underlying them have multiple potential referents. For example, if “homemade” food at the swap needed to be set apart from “industrial” food, what aspects of processed food were problematic—its perceived lack of healthfulness, artificial ingredients, or mass-produced homogeneity? Depending on the logic of opposition, the category of homemade food could easily be situated on either side of this evaluative divide.

Threading the Needle: The Taboo, the Overly Alternative, and the Quotidian

Most commonly, failure occurred when participants attempted to trade items that members who operated on alternative assumptions rejected: items they considered taboo or profane, overly alternative, or quotidian. These logics reflect the oppositional framings participants used to define homemade food as an alternative to the broader food system. However, swap members often rejected both industrial food (on the basis of its unhealthy, unsustainable, and homogenous products) and artisanal alternatives (with their emphasis on skilled, highly specialized craft production)—leaving a razor thin margin of acceptability amid competing demands (see [Figure 2](#)). Both newcomers and established members often brought bad offerings. When newcomers made bad choices about what to trade, they often did not return to the swap, as other participants’ negative evaluations excluded them from the circuit. When established members attempted to trade such items, it often resulted in dissatisfaction among longtime members, who would quietly accuse them of “gaming the system.”

What was considered taboo or profane? Most often, it revolved around what counted as “real” homemade food. “Real food”—as an oppositional identity drawn in relationship to the artificial and unsustainable products and practices of agro-food industry—repeatedly came to the surface in conversations. For Anne, real food was about “not just nurturing the body but the soul. I mean, it’s nice to have food that has that, like, sort of, real, authentic, you know, prepared-from-scratch taste to it as opposed to, you know, the Lean Cuisines that I used to eat when I was, like, fresh out of college.” Describing going to a farm and picking her own basil, Anne explained, “this is, food at its very, you know, most basic level, like, right out of the earth.” “Real food” has a material integrity, conceptualized as connection to the soil, more palpable taste, and distance from mass production. It is “honest.”

Rachel, a 32-year-old librarian working as a university administrative assistant had similar ideas, describing why buying strawberries in January was “the most ridiculous thing on earth.” Lidia expressed incredulity about most American food. While she believed mass-produced foods could theoretically be acceptable to consume, she refused to buy products that were not honest. “Why would anyone ever even think to put animal bones [in the form of gelatin] in yogurt?” she asked bewilderedly. Swap participants rejected foods that had artificial ingredients or were made from mass-produced, manufactured products. At a spring swap event, a first-time participant brought homemade “truffles” made of ground Oreo cookies. One regular participant, noticing the truffles, asked, “now, are the truffles actually made of Oreo cookies?” “Yeah,” the new would-be swapper enthusiastically answered, pleased with his re-articulation of a store-bought product into an innovative new form. “Oh, well then I won’t be able to trade with you, because I can only trade for, like, really homemade things. Like made from scratch, with no preservatives or chemicals or anything, because

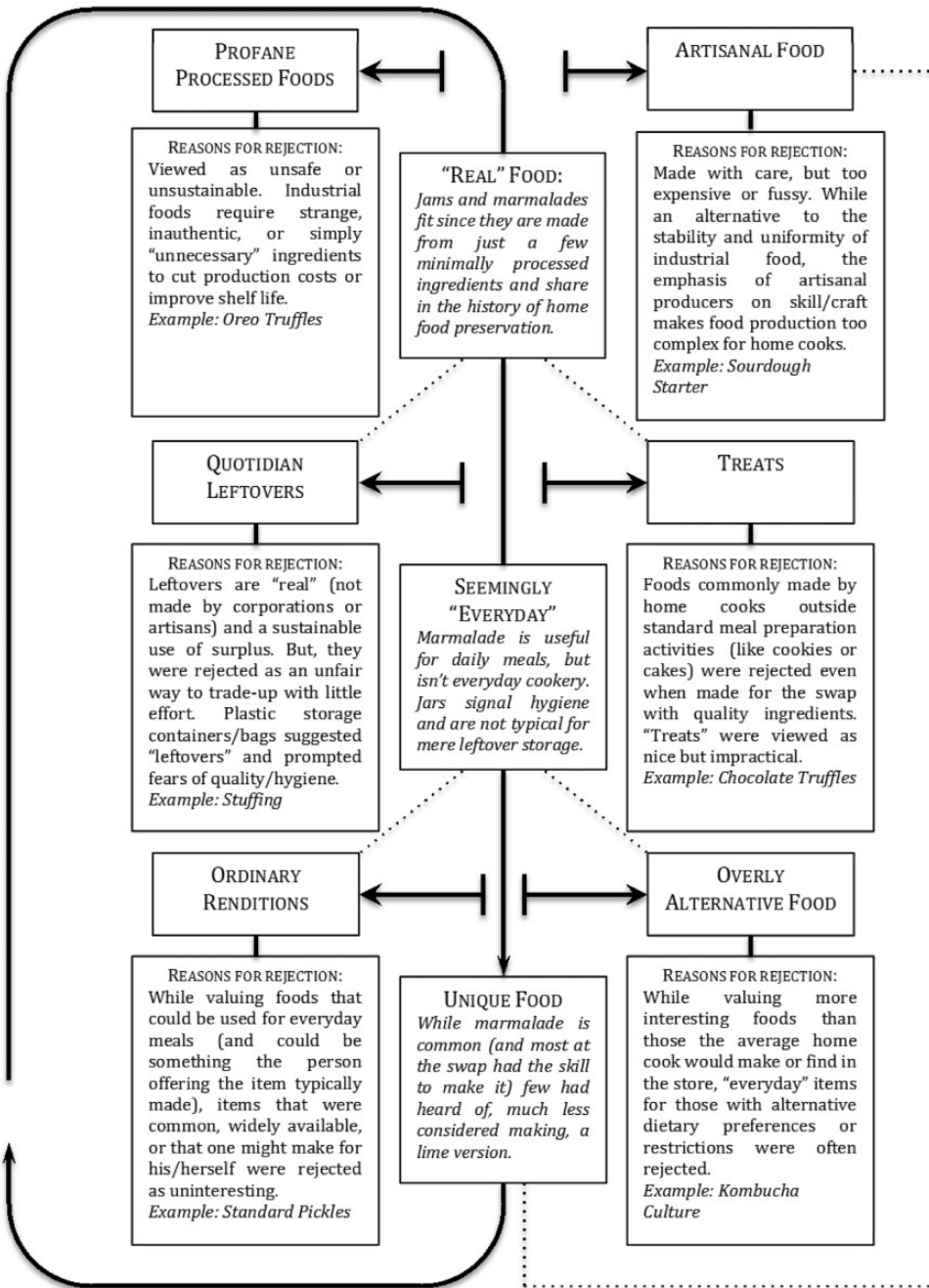


Figure 2. “Threading the Needle” of Oppositions: The Case of the Coveted Lime Marmalade

Notes: Dotted lines signal common erroneous assumptions of acceptability swappers made navigating these oppositions, while only the central pathway contains the narrow set of characteristics able to reconcile the competing logics of opposition swappers employed. While organized as linear for clarity, these logics operated concurrently in the swap. For example, a “unique” item might ultimately be rejected as too artisanal.

my friend doesn’t eat any processed foods. She only eats *homemade* things, that she makes completely herself” (emphasis added).

At the same time, swappers frequently rejected foods deemed *too* alternative. To be sure, swap participants wanted healthful, sustainable alternatives to industrial foods. They were opposed to the

bland, homogenous flavors they perceived in mass-produced products. However, participants with offerings that strayed too far from the gastronomic mainstream had difficulty finding partners. One young woman offered portions of her personal Kombucha culture (used to make a fermented, probiotic tea drink) and struggled to make more than one trade. It certainly did not help that she came without samples and packaged the culture in what swap participants joked looked like old chemical vials. Similarly, participants who brought vegan and gluten free products often left with them, if only because these products were not part of others' diets.

One regular member came with sourdough starter for trade, and samples of the bread she baked from it. While swap participants were willing to put significant effort into the items they brought, many balked at having to refresh a sourdough culture every few days or bake a loaf of bread. The woman spent the entire swap trying to convince people it was "really no trouble at all." When she returned next time with the same starter she brought a waffle iron to make sourdough waffles, hoping to convince people they could use it for less time-consuming projects.

Difficulty trading something like a sourdough starter highlights the contradictions in swappers' opposition to not only the dominant food system, but also the foodie predilection for artisanal production. Homemade food required a symbolic renunciation of both reliance on industry and on skilled artisans, all the while possessing the seemingly everyday quality we noted above. Shauna believed that one of the most important aspects of the swap was "creating a culture where people understand that it's kind of manageable to create real food." Likewise, Lidia—a 31-year-old Ph.D. student from France—was very uncomfortable with the idea that the jam she made was artisanal. Rather, she simply wanted to do something with her hands that yielded a tangible end result. As she described it: "There are people who believe that food is something that they cannot possibly make themselves . . . But then there are people who actually can make food but keep thinking that making food is something ordinary people can't do themselves." For Lidia, making a jar of jam is simply practical—if she can do it better herself, why wouldn't she. However, that doesn't make it "artisanal."

Given the emphasis on foods that could be part of participants' everyday lives and cookery, participants often brought items that truly had the feel of leftovers—without evidence of the significant effort and originality that success usually required. One might assume that the stated desire for "real" home cooked foods would extend to shared leftovers, however this was not the case. Rather than adhering to a single standard for evaluating homemade food, the concept of homemade is "a malleable cultural construct that consumers find 'good to think with'" (Moisio, Arnould, and Price 2004:379). Products that seemed quotidian were routinely rejected, bearing too much affinity to the mundane world of the mass-produced. Any suggestion that an item was "ordinary" leftovers was greeted with efforts to reinforce swap boundaries.

At the November swap, a man and a woman in their late 20s brought homemade vegan stuffing. They presented the stuffing in a large bowl, as one might at a Thanksgiving table, and packaged it the way leftovers are handled after the Thanksgiving meal, by spooning servings into large Ziploc bags. As our researcher circulated through the swap during the sampling period, a regular participant leaned over and quietly said, "it generally takes people a few tries to figure out what works here." This couple made only one trade, and left with a full bowl of stuffing. Exiting, the woman said to her partner, loud enough to be heard, "At least we know what not to do next time." To our knowledge, they did not return. Their failure to achieve exchanges and social acceptance mirrors the difficulties of a woman who blogged about her unsuccessful attempts to trade her homemade scones, as well as another first time swapper who offered vanilla cupcakes with vanilla frosting on a platter at a summer swap. The would-be cupcake swapper—an elderly white woman who departed from the group's typical demographic—was hardly even included in conversations, let alone trades. But returning members also had difficulties trading things like corn bread, chocolate chip cookies, and ordinary cucumber pickles.

In our interviews the organizers all mentioned that they would trade with first-time participants to make them feel welcome. However, not all members were willing to engage with would-be swappers

who did not fully understand the expectations. One regular participant would trade with first timers; however, she would always give them tips (like “no brownies!”). If they came back and still did not get it, she was not afraid to reject even personal, face-to-face offers.

Oppositional Logics and Competing Trading Strategies

Food swap participants brought more than competing understandings about what “homemade food” meant in the context of a food swap: they also expected to get different things out of their participation. Motivations for membership reflected the underlying oppositional comparisons described above. As a result, approaches to food swap participation, like the definitional requirements for the food itself, were often in conflict.

One motivation was to use surplus food in an environmentally sustainable manner, and to encourage support of local agriculture. The desire to “use up” a subscription farm share motivated the founding of the swap. As a single, urban professional Shauna struggled for a year to use her farm share before hearing about food swapping. She immediately thought that starting a swap would be a great way to put her share to use and allow her to keep supporting a local farm. Noticing an abundance of similar ingredients in the items available at one swap, Shauna exclaimed, “Whoa, there’s a lot of corn here. I guess we know what everyone’s getting in their farm shares!” This motive often resulted in items that were perishable and bore the most similarity to genuine leftovers—corn salads, blueberry muffins, and simple salsas.

Another group had only sporadic interest, because of an item they enjoyed making from time to time that could easily be scaled-up to a large batch. One young woman was famous for her romesco (a Spanish condiment). Such participants would come several times a year to trade for a stockpile of jams, jellies, and pickles, returning only to restock. Others, like the couple who brought the pear butter, used the swap as a one-time opportunity to get rid of surplus.

Still others used the swap as a monthly chance to be creative and practice a skill they found pleasure in—most often, canning. Lidia described how she participated not mainly for the products she could receive (which she confessed she often did not like) but because she needed an outlet for all of the food she makes. Another regular member was a professional baker who used the swap as a chance to try out atypical flavor combinations for jams and jellies, such as the tomato basil jelly swappers eagerly vied for. Rachel enjoyed trying new recipes for the swaps, and would post ideas on online message boards for feedback in the weeks before the event. Swappers like Rachel bemoaned the fact that others, like the woman who made the romesco sauce, did not come more often—or brought items that didn’t seem as carefully planned.

When regular members violated others’ expectations concerning the circuit’s media, practices, meanings, and motivations, they failed to secure trades or left fellow members disgruntled. One regular swapper felt pressured into a bad trade with a fellow member. We left with her, and observed her hand the item to a homeless man on the street before remarking about how gross she thought it was. During one swap, a regular participant quietly mentioned that she felt some regular members gamed the system: bringing perishable leftover items hoping to trade up to a better pantry. This frustration eventually led her to curtail her participation. In a follow up interview, she explained that she was still making creatively flavored jams every month but didn’t think the items she could get in return at the swap were worth her time.

Members who brought perishable items and leftovers from heartier meals became frustrated that their pantries and refrigerators were filled with jam from swappers practicing their canning skills or experimenting with flavors. At one point, we had 20 jars of jam in our possession. Such complaints often led to once-regular members taking breaks from attending, with the stated intention of working through their surplus. However, their absence left the swap with lower volumes of trades and, ultimately, more dissatisfied members. These frustrations contributed to long-term instability in membership, and the resulting failure of the circuit to provide robust economic or social exchanges.

DISCUSSION

We have offered the case of the Northeastern Food Swap as a first example in the literature on circuits of a failed circuit, in which individuals tried to establish a circuit as an alternative economy, but the economic and social relationships proved unsustainable. While we might expect food swap participants to have clear expectations of what belonged within the familiar category of “homemade” (Fiske and Taylor 1991), our findings reveal the extent to which competing standards of evaluation can proliferate in oppositional contexts—even amongst a homogeneous group attempting to transact in relatively familiar domains. Oppositional logics have been shown to promote strong category definitions and identities (Carroll and Swaminathan 2000), providing “a diagnosis of the deficits of the existing system, a prognosis of what an alternative should look like, and a motivation for action” (Weber et al. 2008:561). Such oppositions allow for positive framings of the proposed alternative across salient evaluative criteria (Weber et al. 2008).

In this case, oppositional logics did not perform this function. Contradictory standards emerged in a context characterized by multiple binaries of opposition: food swappers simultaneously opposed the industrial food system and its highly artisanal alternatives. Like participants in other alternative food systems, members opposed the practices of agro-industry. They desired more ecologically sustainable consumption and valorized an aesthetic of sustainability (Carfagna et al. 2014). Motivated solely by such concerns, trading true “leftovers” would have been an appropriate expression of this logic. However, a sustainable DIY ethos may be fundamentally incompatible with the foodie quest for novel, exotic flavors and ingredients that required participants to create something special for fellow swappers. At the same time, while swap members valued creativity, they frequently opposed framings of alternative food as artisanal (cf. Johnston and Baumann 2007) or rejected offerings that were too creative². Instead, they viewed food as an everyday commodity that people could provide for themselves, indicative of the increasingly productive, DIY-nature of consumer life (Carfagna et al. 2014; Kneese, Rosenblat and boyd 2014). Yet, few participants could consistently match the skills and training required for successful DIY craft production. In the crucible of an exchange setting like the food swap, where these logics provided the basis not only for audience reception but also economic valuation, these contradictions were acutely realized.

Our research revealed the polysemic, often contradictory nature of what “homemade” food meant for swappers. It was not simply food made by hand in the home as a part of one’s daily life. It needed to be seasonal, local, or natural, without being expected, parochial, or too “crunchy.” It could not be something swappers would ordinarily prepare in their day-to-day lives, but it also could not be something swappers wouldn’t imagine using in their daily lives. It could be something that swappers had to transform into something else in their own kitchens (like a flavored cocktail syrup), but it couldn’t be something that would take too much effort to transform (like a sourdough starter). It needed to be healthy, without being too alternative. It needed to be everyday, without being mundane. Swappers needed to weave their way through a web of negative criteria to be successful. In the end, although it wasn’t a null set, the number of acceptable characteristics was rather small.

One solution would have been to make the criteria for successful offerings clear, on the website, in the frequent blogs that one founder posted, or via a brochure. Swap members even suggested this to the founders. However, a fundamental basis of the swap’s alternative identity was its formal openness

2 The atmosphere of the highly successful BK Swappers group, located in Brooklyn, stands in sharp contrast to the Northeastern Food Swaps opposition to homemade food being framed as “artisanal.” Several artisanal food businesses have gotten their start at their events (Paster 2016). One participant remarked:

Big agriculture, mega-stores, and corporate owned farms aren’t going to die, but they will make way for a good size section of the American population that has a greater care for the food they consume than the masses. Enter the artisanal food producer. BK Swappers exemplifies Brooklyn’s role as a cornerstone in a wide-sweeping revolution in how food is produced, obtained, and even thought about. Brooklyn firmly has its place in the “Roots of the New Artisanal Movement” (Brooklyn Bell 2012).

to all would-be participants. Would defining “homemade” food too clearly stifle the ethic of openness and the empowerment to take back one’s pantry that the swap hoped to promote? Many food swaps across the United States have similarly vague instructions. In fact, we found that many other swaps’ websites replicate the instructions offered by our swap, *verbatim*. The failure to make expectations more transparent suggests that opacity is almost a fundamental feature of the swap: a consequence of the oppositional logics that dominated criteria for acceptable items and their intersection with the positive qualities sought by foodies.

As participants drew on these often-contradictory logics, competing boundaries of inclusion and exclusion developed, leading to membership instability, discontent, and eventually, collapse. Even when participants could identify what made an item popular, consistently producing items that could generate trades and balance these competing standards proved difficult. Inability to balance these logics and appeal to the sensibilities of other participants made newcomers feel unwelcome. For long-time members, month after month these difficulties led to frustration—either because they were dissatisfied with their own offerings or those from other swappers. One lesson is that the proliferation of competing logics of evaluation in a circuit can lead to the proliferation of justifications for members’ and would-be-members’ exclusion.

The absence of money, and the exchange structure of the swap, also contributed to the failure to make trades. Cash was never introduced into the swap as a medium of exchange, as it was considered taboo in this barter setting. We suspect that if there were an option to pay in cash, or even a swap-specific currency, that the symbolic qualities of the goods may have been incorporated into a system of valuation less conspicuously linked to individual members’ judgments. With cash or scrip, goods deemed symbolically inferior might have been purchased for small amounts and highly valued products could have commanded high prices. This is a kind of Simmelian (1978) position where money becomes merely a quantifiable value, eliding subjective valuations. The paradox is that the introduction of money might have led to more social relations, via ongoing trades and repeat attendance. Its absence may have resulted in exaggerated reliance on aesthetic signifiers of shared categorical understandings as a mode of evaluation.

This trend was exacerbated by the swap’s adherence to an informal but strong convention that items should trade on a one item-to-one item basis. One jar of jam should be equivalent to a bag of granola. From a standard economic perspective, this equivalence is irrational. Cost, in labor time or materials, is not equivalent across items. However, we rarely saw this convention violated in practice, and those few times were when founders would make “charity” trades, taking multiple items in exchange for one of their own from a newcomer who was unable to find trading partners. In interviews, people repeatedly mentioned the convention that a pint jar was the basis of equivalence. Even where there were no pint jars involved, the expectation was that amounts would be roughly equal to what fits in a pint jar and that the effort involved in production would be roughly equal to that involved in making a pint of jam. If there were a flexible exchange rate it might have led to more trades, as people would have been able to accept multiple items in exchange for their own more highly valued offerings.

What does our case suggest for the debate about money in economic sociology? In recent years, economic sociologists have rejected the classical view that money is a universal homogenizer and corrosive of social relations, arguing that money is a social construction with contextually dependent meanings (Zelizer 1989), and that money and intimate social relations can coexist (Zelizer 2005). We take a third position. Given the absence of money in the food swap, competing logics drawn in opposition to other fields made determining the acceptability of items especially difficult, leading to rampant devaluation of others’ offerings and high rejection rates. If money had been present, there might have been less policing of symbolic boundaries through competing notions of value and possibly more genuine social connection. The quantifiable and universally recognized value of money would have allowed people to express their willingness to pay without having to convert the items into an underlying matrix rife with oppositional standards of alternative worth.

CONCLUSION

Our findings suggest the complementarity and utility of concepts drawn from organizational sociology for understanding the conditions under which circuits succeed, particularly when they are created *de novo* to foster more equitable, alternative economies. Far from familiar categories—like homemade food—taking on increasingly settled standards of evaluation, as prevailing theories in organizational and economic sociology predict, within some circuits logics of action drawn from broader cultural fields sustain competing and opaque standards of evaluation. At the boundaries of food swap circuits, we witnessed the careful imagining and reimagining of even the most seemingly obvious category of homemade food—in opposition to a host of perceived problems in the broader food system. In this case, the incompatibility of the logics undergirding participants' critiques stifled their ability to positively identify what type of alternative the homemade food at the swap should provide, all but ensuring that few economic matches or social connections developed. Drawing on multivalent oppositions from the larger cultural environment can lead to circuit failure by stifling the ability of participants to identify a desired alternative, particularly without money to equilibrate.

This case may be instructive for other sharing economy initiatives, as well as attempts to create novel economic arrangements that deviate from dominant, conventional market practices. Open access, the absence of a cash requirement, and a simple fixed ratio were expected to yield an inclusive trading regime with empowered participants. Instead, it led to uncertain expectations, and even stifled potential connections among a homogeneous group of members. The lesson is that social innovation in the economic arena requires explicit attention to establishing consistent alternatives and widely agreed upon standards of valuation and exchange.

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