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# The socio-material practices of the transformation of urban food markets

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Focusing on the recent transformation of urban food markets in the UK, this paper applies a practice theory perspective to analyse the social practices involved in the making and doing of urban food markets. Based on fieldwork in Barnsley and Sheffield, we identify three sets of interrelated practices that are involved in the transformation of urban markets: economic diversification, traditionalisation, and technological innovation. We describe these practices as socio-material in the sense that they involve the practices of buying and selling, and other forms of social interaction, combined with the foodstuffs, infrastructure, and other material things that together constitute the contemporary marketplace. The evidence presented in this paper challenges prevalent dichotomised ways of thinking about market transformation in terms of inclusion and exclusion or modernity and tradition.

## KEYWORDS

food markets, modernisation, practice theory, urban transformation

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on the socio-material practices of transforming urban food markets. Our empirical interest lies in traditional food market halls and outdoor markets in the UK that have recently undergone substantial renovations and/or relocation leading to a transformation in their character and appearance. Many of these transformations are tied into the neoliberal political project of “urban regeneration,” which seeks to generate economic wealth through creating new urban spaces within formerly derelict or impoverished urban districts.

Before turning to our own empirical work, we would like to acknowledge the substantial literature on different kinds of food markets in the UK and overseas – though coverage remains uneven. While farmers' markets, selling artisan goods of local provenance, have attracted much academic attention (e.g., Brown, 2002; Gillespie et al., 2007; Hinrichs, 2000; Holloway & Kneafsey, 2000; Kirwan, 2004; Spiller, 2012), there is less research on more “traditional” markets – but see González (2019) for an overview. A key issue concerns the inclusionary potential of urban food markets versus accusations of their socially exclusionary nature. Because of the relatively low barriers-to-entry for sellers and buyers, public markets are on the one hand celebrated as a space in which people with diverse socio-cultural backgrounds can participate, encounter each other, and “rub along” (Hiebert et al., 2015; Watson, 2009; Watson & Studdert, 2006). On the other hand, numerous authors have identified the exclusionary nature of many urban markets. These issues have been raised by Slocum (2007; see also Guthman, 2008; Alkon & McCullen, 2011) in relation to the “whiteness” of farmers' markets and food co-ops in Minneapolis-St Paul; by Coles and Crang (2011) in London's Borough Market; and by Zukin (2004) in relation to New

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York City's Union Square market. Similar questions have been raised about the social exclusivity of farmers' markets in Prague (Spilková et al., 2013) and the racialised displacement of food vendors in Montpellier (Tchoukaleyska, 2016).

Academic work often tends either to idealise urban food markets as places of sociality, inclusion, and alternative consumption or to condemn them as exclusive domains of white middle-class privilege. The former literature (mainly from Europe) tends to treat urban food markets as the continuation of "traditional" food selling and shopping practices that are more dependent on personal communication and physical interaction with places, foodstuffs, and people. The latter literature (mainly from North America) sees urban food markets as caricatures of historical markets, as a spectacle and pseudo-tradition, invented for the benefit of wealthy middle-class consumers. In this paper, we aim to overcome this binary approach by acknowledging both the history and the practices of *making and doing* urban food markets. In doing so, we hope to provide a framework that helps answer the question of how and in what ways recent transformations affect traders and consumers – without pre-judging urban food markets as either inclusive or exclusionary places of contemporary consumption. To facilitate this analysis, we resort to practice theories (Everts et al., 2011), which seek to understand everyday life and all other social phenomena as a motley assembly of social practices and material arrangements.

In what follows, we seek to trace the practices that are involved in transforming urban food markets – the "doing" of transformation. The actors – or "carriers" of practices in Reckwitz's (2002) terms – include traders and customers, local authorities and market managers as well as those involved in urban policy and local economic development. To develop our argument, we employ a specific practice-based approach that helps us to distinguish three interrelated sets of practices that are involved in the transformation of urban food markets: economic diversification, traditionalisation, and technological innovation.

## 2 | PRACTICE THEORIES AND FOOD MARKETS

From a practice theory perspective, food markets present an organised nexus of activities and materialities. While the main practices include buying and selling food, markets are also sites of many other kinds of interaction and sociality involving multiple materialities besides foodstuffs. Schatzki (2002) describes social phenomena (such as food markets) as bundles of practices and material arrangements that are linked to other such bundles. In order to grasp any such phenomenon, the bundle needs careful inspection and its networked capillaries need to be followed while bearing in mind the continuously changing nature of the wider "transmogrifying web of practices and arrangements" (Schatzki, 2010, p. 130).

To understand how markets change over time, we draw on Shove et al.'s (2012) distinction between three elements of practice: competences, meanings, and materials. In the context of food markets, *competences* include the know-how and practical understandings of how to sell or buy food, how to behave appropriately in a food market, and – from a more management-oriented perspective – how markets need to be organised, taking into account the different interests of customers and traders and the specific (e.g., infrastructural) conditions of the marketplace. *Meanings* are the wider set of culturally significant beliefs and ideas that guide or underlie many actions, such as expected standards of food quality, trust in economic transactions, demand and supply, food tastes and preferences. *Materials* include the foodstuffs themselves as well as the other materials that comprise the place, such as the stalls, boxes, scales, and tills, and all the mobile things, such as money, credit cards, bags, trolleys, cars, infrastructures, and last but not least the people and their bodies performing the practices that produce and reproduce the food market.

In the case of food markets, when we try to understand the impact of transformations on traders and customers, we need to account for the changing practices of traders, managers, and planners as well as those of customers. A mere change in location or design of a food market does not tell us directly if, and to what extent, it influences people's lives or changes how they conduct their daily affairs. A closer examination of what the practices of selling, buying, or socialising look like may be a better starting point for understanding the repercussions of such transformations and their potentially exclusionary or inclusionary effects. These effects need to be understood not just in terms of financial and physical barriers but also as embedded within barriers or enablers that emanate from the practices themselves: new sets of skills that need to be acquired for a continued participation in the practices of consumption.

In the wider retail system, the practices of selling have changed over time from market traders to shop owners to cashiers at the supermarket checkout. The introduction of self-service was one of the historically most significant shifts in food retailing (Alexander et al., 2008) – a new set of skills had to be developed while new materials and technologies (from the turnstile to the bar code) were introduced. Similarly, advertising practices have changed from hawkers and market traders calling out to customers, to handbills, signboards, and shop-window displays, to increasing use of digital and mobile media (Beard, 2016). Other settings and practices of shopping for food have survived or have been reinvented. Within urban food markets, there are still traders who work their own stalls and the practice of buying food includes the interaction between

traders and customers, including a tacit sense of know-how and a shared vocabulary. Comparing different selling and buying practices, the ones we find in more “traditional” food markets have experienced fierce competition from supermarkets and new practitioners need to be “recruited” (Shove et al., 2012, p. 66–73). In the following, we explore the practices of urban food markets in transformation.

### 3 | RESEARCHING URBAN FOOD MARKETS

“Traditional” market halls were introduced throughout the 19th century as modern, rational, and properly governed places of food distribution. They were designed to bring an end to the messy and unordered street markets with mobile vendors, unregulated business practices, and a reputation for shoddy goods and adulterated food (Schmiechen & Carls, 1999). However, in some places, market halls went into decline again as early as the late 19th century, being replaced by individual shops (Guàrdia et al., 2018, p. 116). With the rise of supermarket shopping and other large-scale retailing formats since the 1950s, urban food markets went into further decline, yet continued to exist in various forms as residual or marginalised spaces of food shopping, as tourist attractions, or as reinvented spaces for alternative, local, artisanal, and/or organic food consumption. This bifurcation of urban food markets as places of consumption has led to considerable confusion in assessing their present and future significance. While the decline of urban food markets has been decried for decades (Jones et al., 2007), their shift towards a more (economically) sustainable customer base has faced equally fierce criticism, casting those markets as defectors from the original cause of supporting local communities (González, 2019).

However, considering the practices of making and doing urban food markets, our research demonstrates the rich diversity of practices that characterise today's food markets. As Smith et al. (2014) point out, challenging more generic approaches to food markets, “the evolution and future trajectory of traditional food markets needs to be framed in more spatially contingent terms, with cultural and economic practices that order the external pressures of retail restructuring interwoven with the everyday internal dynamics of market exchange” (Smith et al., 2014, p. 127). This diversity of practices and dynamics can be found by comparing different markets, but also within one and the same market.

To deal with this diversity empirically, and in order to establish a framework that helps us to address our research question, we identify three different and at times paradoxically interrelated sets of practices that characterise the transformation of contemporary food markets: economic diversification, traditionalisation, and technological innovation. This combination of practices is particularly important where urban food markets suffer from economic marginalisation due to a loss of their customer base and/or spatial decentring.

The following sections draw on existing research as well as our fieldwork in South Yorkshire in 2018 and 2019, with the support of the National Market Traders' Federation. We focus, in particular, on the recent redevelopment of Barnsley Market, which reopened in November 2018 as part of a £130m town centre reinvestment, and on the earlier redevelopment of Sheffield's Castle market, which relocated to The Moor in 2013. Our methods included on-site interviews with 14 market traders and three managers, participant observation on seven separate occasions, 153 structured interviews with customers, and extensive use of fieldnotes and photography. We also used pedestrian counts to measure footfall at different hours of the day and times of the week. Data summaries were produced after each visit, including verbatim transcription of interviews with market traders.

### 4 | ECONOMIC DIVERSIFICATION

Recent efforts at transforming urban food markets clearly had the intended (and sometimes unintended) effect of economic diversification. By this, we refer to a change in consumption practices occurring at food markets, in general, and in relation to these markets, in particular. Food markets have always been more than just places where food is bought and sold. But, more recently, urban food markets have become sites of tourism, leisure, ethnic diversity, and/or practices of middle-class distinction. All of these transformations led to the recruitment of new customers (sometimes also securing existing ones) in order to attract new trade or to mitigate the decline of existing trade. Many of these strategies have focused on attracting a more affluent clientele, notwithstanding strategies that have also targeted existing and other less affluent consumers who make market trading viable through the frequency of their visits and increased turnover.

The classic example of economic upscaling strategies can be found in places such as London's Borough Market, where the sale of artisanal, organic, and fine foods has turned this long-established London food market into a global tourist attraction. With an emphasis on origins and authenticity, it displays the “fetishistic character of [...] de-fetishization” (Coles & Crang, 2011, p. 100), which serves tourists and “foodies.” In other places, such as Kirkgate Market in Leeds, the strategy of attracting a more affluent middle-class clientele has included “strategies to sanitize the market” through practices of

“cleaning up” market stalls that did not fit the new vision, contributing to an overall “covert strategy of retail gentrification” (González & Waley, 2013, p. 976). In all these examples, the material practices of changing stalls, appearances, locations, and products went hand-in-glove with bestowing (more or less successfully) market halls with new meanings that were targeted at wealthier customers. Apart from the prices, the required competences to “read” the landscape of artisanal and fine food markets acts as an excluding factor, privileging customers with the cultural capital to indulge their refined culinary taste.

In the case of Kirkgate Market, a “presence of more traders from ‘minorities’ was seen as a ‘unique selling point’” (González & Waley, 2013, p. 975). This encouraged the diversification of the customer base by catering to a wider spectrum of food tastes, but it also involved the exoticisation of foodstuffs and food stalls as a strategy “of making the market into an extension of people's holiday experience” (2013, p. 975). However, there are also other motivations for encouraging ethnic diversification at the market. As Hiebert et al. suggest, “markets are often the most diverse parts of cities, where people who might lead largely separate lives come face to face and interact” (2015, p. 6). One fishmonger in Sheffield's Moor Market, for example, has taken on staff from Vietnam, Bangladesh, China, and the Philippines, using their linguistic skills to meet the increasingly diverse demand from local residents and students. Here, economic diversification manifests itself in the material inclusion of “exotic” foodstuffs, the diverse meanings these foodstuffs have for different customers, and the competences to use those foodstuffs – as well as to sell food in more than one language.

Other strategies of diversification have received less attention. Many food markets have already, in the past, included non-food stalls. While some markets (particularly those that follow a gentrifying, upscaling script) have increasingly sought to exclude non-food stalls (González & Waley, 2013), other markets have precisely moved in the opposite direction by including, maintaining, or increasing the amount of stalls selling non-food items such as textiles and garments, jewellery, mobile phones, and so on. Another strategy is to sell snacks and lunches that are available for indoor or take-away consumption (see Figure 1). While there are upmarket artisanal versions of such market meals, many markets offer a wide variety of budget meals and snacks, catering to less affluent customers, providing “convenient ideas for busy people” according to one of our market trader respondents who offered pre-prepared meals from her fish stall. The shift of many food markets from a place supplying raw ingredients towards a place for eating and snacking is remarkable. The meaning of market halls has changed for many customers from a place to buy raw foodstuffs to a place where prepared food can also be consumed. Enjoying the diversity of different meal opportunities involves yet another set of skills, including the deciphering and savouring of the “traditional” as well as “modern” cuisines on offer.

## 5 | TRADITIONALISATION

Food markets are often seen as the messy and more traditional counterparts to the modern, sanitised, and organised spaces of the supermarket. However, our research highlights the complex infrastructures and technologies that enable markets to function. The traditionalism found at urban food markets today, we argue, represents an at times conscious and deliberate effort to downplay how technologically advanced and highly regulated urban food markets are, creating an image of traditionality that can be turned into an economic asset (cf. Everts & Jackson, 2009; de la Pradelle, 2006). Notwithstanding the many positive social functions of urban food markets and not impugning the motives of market traders, making a profitable living remains a key imperative for market traders and managers. We interpret the doing, reproduction, and invention of tradition as a strategy that helps to distinguish urban food markets from other retailers. In the following, we point out the most salient practices of traditionalisation we find in market halls.

Assembling materials and meanings, text and images, signage is often used to refer back to shopping as it was imagined 100 or more years ago, with hand-written chalkboards and reference to local production networks. Market criers who noisily praise their goods are also perpetuating traditional market practices and thus contribute to the historicisation of the market. Part of this practice involves the maintaining or new integration of old market tools such as scales and tills. This adds to the historic atmosphere and marks out the contrast to the technical equipment (such as product scanners and conveyor belts) used at supermarkets. Paper bags and other forms of non-plastic packaging also gesture towards a nostalgic sense of place. To make full use of this experience, customers need a competence in reading and understanding these “traditional” practices, including a knowledge about historical market places, settings, and practices. The required competences may work in both ways in terms of exclusion, favouring people whose experience reaches back to older market practices or – when lacking such experience – those who have had time and opportunity to learn the “traditional” language. When it comes to invented traditions, it is again those with the requisite cultural capital who are likely to be most advantaged.

While some of the historicisation work may originate from market management, it is the traders themselves who are actively engaged in creating an amiable visual and sensory experience by designing and decorating their stalls. This may



**FIGURE 1** Meals and snacks at Sheffield's Moor Market.

Source: Photo by K.A. Juraschek

even lead to controversies between developers, managers, and traders. In Sheffield, some of the stallholders criticised the lack of a say in the planning of the market hall and limited design options for their stalls: “It lacks character. [...] I do not think there was much consideration on history or heritage when the market was opened. These are just squared clean boxes. You have to work very hard to make them pretty. [...] the traders are supposed to not put things outside the stall but by doing that it creates more character and it is a better visual experience.” Similarly, the market management in Barnsley insisted on uniform signage for the redeveloped market, attracting criticism from the traders who were keen to personalise their stalls (see Figure 2).

Market traders also work hard to create personal bonds with their customers. This interactive practice contains a large number of highly skilled activities in which traders engage with their customers (cf. Watson & Studdert, 2006). Market traders emphasised their close working relationship with each other and with their customers, built up in some cases over generations (“we look after you and you look after us because you're our customers”).

This is contrasted with the perceived anonymity and modernity of supermarket shopping. While supermarkets can exploit their greater purchasing power (“buying whole auctions of lamb and putting them on at crazy prices,” as one butcher complained), markets compete primarily on the basis of quality and skill. Most of the traders we met had many years' experience and were keen to engage with their customers, sharing their knowledge and skill, with a fondness for banter (“We have a chat, we find out about their families ... If you can't take the banter you'll not get on in market life”). Some traders described how they have watched their customers growing up, serving parents, children, and grandchildren: “If three or four generations come through, we must be doing something right.” Interacting with customers gave the market traders, in their view, a competitive edge, compared to the supermarket model of fast and efficient service where it is possible to drive to the store, do the shopping, and return home without talking to anyone.

Our fieldwork also revealed the ongoing importance of face-to-face interaction in maintaining consumer trust in food, with marketplaces providing sites of participation and local knowledge. Market traders emphasised their knowledge and skill, expressed as “knowing the fish” or being “a proper butcher.” The traders gave customers advice about specific preparation methods or exchanged recipes over the counter as a central part of everyday market life. They reported that younger



**FIGURE 2** Uniform signage at the newly reopened market in Barnsley.

Source: <https://yorkshirefoodguide.co.uk/blog/barnsley-market/> (Accessed March 2021)

consumers were often unsure about how to cook a particular dish or intimidated by unfamiliar ingredients. Well-trained, knowledgeable staff were felt to be important in reducing customer anxieties. Some traders spoke of the quality of their produce, while others emphasised local provenance or superior taste (selling meat “off the hoof,” direct “from farm to table,” “from a carcass not from a box”).

In addition to the special relationship that is built up informally with the customers, the exchange between the traders themselves played an important role as the butcher, who has been running a family-run stall for around 30 years, pointed out: “We are all friends, we have got on for years and years [...] we all work together.” Giving a helping hand and close contact is not just a relic of the past but work that has to be done each day, maintaining practices rather than discontinuing them in the face of changing shopping practices.

## 6 | TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION

Despite the practices of traditionalisation, discussed above, other practices pull in the opposite direction. The need to modernise urban food markets has included the introduction of state of the art infrastructure and facilities such as curtain wall refrigeration, card-payment systems, and internet ordering from suppliers. Nonetheless, market visitors continue to complain about poor accessibility and infrastructure (e.g., inadequate connections to local transport and poor parking facilities), insufficient seating facilities, narrow entrances, and poorly arranged stalls that were perceived as chaotic. All of these aspects hinder their ability to perform their shopping practices “properly.”

For example, the introduction of electronic payments was not universally welcome. Designed to avoid carrying around and paying cash, not all customers saw this as an increase in convenience. As Cohen and Ilieva (2015) also found with respect to New York City farmers' markets, the introduction of electronic vouchers for people entitled to federal food benefits resulted in a transition period throughout which customers and traders struggled with the new technology before

amendments and adaptations to the practice of electronic payments ensued. New materials and technologies often require new competencies that need to be learned and trained. This can be a crucial moment at which it is important not to exclude those who have less time and opportunity to learn a new set of skills.

While some traders felt that contemporary consumers no longer had the time to visit markets, favouring the convenience of supermarket shopping or home delivery, others had adapted to these trends. In Barnsley, for example, it is possible to use an app (ShopAppy) to order a variety of different goods from different traders, which can later be picked up at the market (Figure 3). The app also made it possible to receive goods from the traders delivered at home during the closure of the market due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

A large number of traders, as well as the market management, also maintain social media accounts, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, in order to be able to respond to the needs of customers beyond the opening hours of the market, which usually close in the early evening: “We connect with our customers by being open 24 hours almost. We are always available on social media. [...] We have extended things beyond our little shop” (Sheffield stall selling regional beers from small breweries). Twitter accounts have been used most recently to inform customers about closures, re-openings, and regulations in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. While some of the accounts are run by market managements and city councils (@BarnsleyMarkets, @TheMoorMarket), others are more directly engaged by market traders themselves (@BarnsleyMarket). How far these new communication channels are acting either as inclusionary or exclusionary tools remains an open question.



FIGURE 3 Tweet from Barnsley Markets featuring Jen's Food Blog and ShopAppyUK.



## 7 | CONCLUSION

This paper has addressed the current transformation of urban markets in the UK, including key questions arising from their redevelopment. The paper challenges the common binary approach, which sees such markets as either inclusive or exclusive spaces. While some authors believe them to be inclusive because of their low barriers to entry and their character as a public space, others characterise them as socially exclusive spaces because of their white middle-class clientele. The paper also challenges a second binary, whereby food markets are viewed as traditional spaces, opposed to modern spaces of food consumption such as supermarkets. Using evidence from preliminary research in Barnsley and Sheffield, we have argued that both binaries are unhelpful as a default perspective on urban food markets.

Focusing on the observation of actual social practices “on the ground,” we conclude that urban marketplaces may be inclusionary or exclusionary as well as combining elements of “tradition” and “modernity.” Instead of prejudging the wider social meanings of food markets, we draw on practice theory to highlight the complex social and spatial relationships of these markets. This is all the more important since many more “traditional” marketplaces such as market halls (our prime example in this paper) have come under increasing pressure to “modernise” through processes of relocation, renovation, and digitalisation. While much of this transformation fits into the neoliberal script of urban regeneration, the lived experiences in such markets are complex. Hiring staff with foreign language skills, for example, can be seen as a way of profiting from cultural diversity, but it can also mean that traders are acknowledging and adapting to an increasingly diverse clientele. Likewise, the traditionalisation of market halls may be a deliberate strategy of market managers to commodify the past. However, in our own examples, it was the traders who wanted to bring tradition and heritage back into the modern marketplace, which, in their opinion, “lacked character” in its design and development. Despite all the work that traders put into creating a “visual experience,” the digitalisation of urban food markets is in full swing. Social media and online ordering are increasingly woven into the socio-material arrangement of the urban food market – even more so since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and recurring lockdowns are forcing traders and managers once more to improvise and innovate.

In sum, through the application of practice theory, our preliminary research adds nuance to the rather polarised existing literature on the transformation of urban food markets. The paper also highlights several areas for future research, examining the socio-material practices that underlie contemporary processes of economic diversification, traditionalisation, and technological innovation.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data are available in anonymised form from the authors.

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