

Scaling-Up Alternative Food Networks

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1. Introduction

Critics of mainstream food systems worry that today's global food systems undermine local food cultures, contribute to the alienation of consumers and producers, and exploit and harm agricultural workers. They are troubled by the fact that global food supply chains are environmentally unsustainable and vulnerable to even moderate economic disruptions and natural disasters. They claim that mainstream food is less nutritious and less safe than it ought to be. For the purpose of this article, I take for granted that there are many objectionable features of the systems that create, distribute, and sell the food we eat.

Domestic and global political institutions should correct the problems of our food systems, but our political institutions have failed. And there may be little reason for optimism about future reforms, in the absence of pressure from below. Accordingly, individuals may have good reasons to use their consumer choices to resist the various harms associated with mainstream food (Hussain 2012). Under better circumstances, consumer choices might not have significant moral upshot. But in our world, individuals may have a variety of moral reasons for using their consumer choices to promote better ways of creating, distributing, and selling food.

People who use their consumer choices to resist the problems of mainstream food systems often participate in alternative food networks (AFNs). They purchase Fair Trade foods, they shop at farmers markets, or they take part in community supported agriculture (CSA) and food cooperatives. They aim for their AFN food purchases to address many of the different problems with contemporary food systems (Goodman, Dupuis, and Goodman 2011). The various goals people pursue through AFNs are often categorized under the banner of "food justice," though AFN advocates usually do not articulate theories of (food) justice. And it's not clear that the various reasons embraced by AFN advocates are reasons of *justice*, rather than reasons of other sorts.

It is a tremendously complicated task to determine which reasons people have, but I want to identify some of the reasons people may have for participating in AFNs.¹ A duty of beneficence counts in favor of participating in AFNs if participating in AFNs will do good for other people, for example, by improving the working conditions of agricultural workers or promoting local food security. A natural duty of justice is a reason to participate in AFNs if participating in

AFNs will promote the creation of more just food systems. A duty of repair is a reason to participate in AFNs if AFNs are a means by which one can compensate those one has harmed, for example, if members of the developed world can use Fair Trade to compensate members of the developing world for the harms caused by agricultural subsidies and import tariffs. And an obligation of fairness is a reason to participate in AFNs if participating in AFNs will diminish the way in which consumers take unfair advantage of other participants in food systems, for example, by participating in less exploitative trading relationships.

We need to be attentive to the different moral and factual terrains surrounding particular forms of alternative food, if we are going to identify reasons that count in favor of participating in them. For example, duties of repair and fairness may count in favor of participating in Fair Trade, given historical harms and institutional unfairness in international politics. In contrast, these duties may not be weighty reasons to participate in many forms of local food. (While this article focuses on AFNs in general, I will call attention to differences among AFNs when those differences seem especially relevant to the arguments I make.)

Some of the moral reasons in favor of participating in AFNs in their current form are also moral reasons in favor of scaling up AFNs. The basic idea is that there are forms of food production, distribution, and sale that promote some of the goals of “food justice” (e.g., reducing the exploitation of agricultural workers), and it is possible to scale up these networks (and thereby affect more people) in ways that better promote these goals. Whatever moral reasons we have for accomplishing these goals via small and short AFNs (e.g., duties of beneficence and obligations of fairness) are also moral reasons we have for accomplishing these goals via scaled-up AFNs.

But what if scaled-up AFNs would fail to promote some of the goals that AFNs promote in their current forms? In particular, what if there is something about being small (and having short supply chains) that makes today’s AFNs morally effective? Here, it may be helpful to say something about the ways in which current AFNs are often “short and small.”² First, AFNs may have shorter distances between producers and consumers, that is, shorter supply chains. Second, food in today’s AFNs is often produced at farms (and farming collectives) that are significantly smaller than the farms (and agricultural corporations) that populate mainstream food networks. Third, AFNs often make use of small and direct retail venues, rather than large grocery stores with extensive supply chains. Perhaps it matters that AFNs are short and small in these ways. Perhaps there is something valuable about being short and small that counts against scaling up AFNs.

Consider, for example, a recent debate about scaling up Fair Trade. Fair-trade International (FLO) is the largest international organization for developing and reviewing standards for Fair Trade certification. Goods that receive FLO certification can demand higher prices, and these higher prices finance both higher wages for agricultural workers and development grants for agricultural

communities. In 2011, Fair Trade USA (FT USA) broke away from FLO because it claimed that FLO's commitment to work only with small producers stood in the way of scaling up Fair Trade. In FT USA's words, "the Fair Trade movement has a calling: to be inclusive and to embrace the needs of the entire rural community, including farm laborers on larger farms" (Fair Trade USA 2014). FT USA vowed to work with large plantations and to partner with agricultural corporations to "extend the benefits of Fair Trade to millions more farmers and workers . . . [doing] more good for more people" (Raynolds 2012, 285).³

FLO responded to FT USA's departure with the claim that "Fair Trade is about more than premium or prices, it's philosophical" (Fairtrade International 2012). Unfortunately, FLO did not elaborate much on the "philosophical" basis of their rejection of FT USA's decision to partner with large-scale corporations. But we can assume it had to do with the importance FLO attaches to the small scale and short supply chains that are characteristic of the forms of Fair Trade that FLO advocates. However, this invites us to question what could be so valuable about working with small producers—and avoiding entanglements with large-scale production and distribution systems—to justify a decision not to scale up worthwhile AFNs.

Before going farther, I want to discuss two possible attempts to dismiss this project. First, someone might observe that we could scale up AFNs while keeping them small and short. Instead of cooperating with large corporations, we could scale up AFNs by creating many more farmers markets, CSAs, small organic farms, metropolitan buying clubs, and so on. In response, I agree that it may sometimes be possible to scale up AFNs while keeping them small and short. However, I take for granted that in at least some cases (and beyond some levels of growth) further growth in AFNs will require economies of scale and other efficiencies that only large corporate partners can make available. For example, many people are unwilling (or unable) to pay the price premiums that local food and Fair Trade now demand (Grebitus, Lusk, and Nayga 2013).

Second, someone might object that what makes an AFN "alternative" is the fact that it has a small size and a short supply chain. Accordingly, it is a linguistic fact that we cannot scale up AFNs by partnering with large corporations, since whatever would result from such partnerships would no longer be AFNs. In response, what interests me most about AFNs are not the forms they have historically taken, but their potential to address various problems of mainstream food systems. Therefore, it makes sense to ask whether we ought to scale up ethically focused food networks, even if that would make their forms less "alternative" from an historical point of view.

2. Unmotivated Consumers and Corporate Cooptation

Some people who want to protect small and short AFNs are concerned that cooperating with large corporations will undermine progress toward the goals of alternative food, even if there may be some short-term benefits from those

cooperative efforts. For example, they may agree that working with corporate producers, distributors, and retail operators will permit AFNs to take advantage of economies of scale—leading to lower prices, greater market share, and broader social impact. But these critics worry that it would be ultimately counterproductive for alternative food to embrace the capitalist values of efficiency, convenience, low price, and so on.

One version of this objection speaks to the fickle *motivations of consumers*. Perhaps consumers will purchase alternative foods only when they can do so in the context of the more direct relationships that small and short AFNs foster. For example, Laura Delind says that “[w]ithout an emotional, a spiritual, and a physical glue to create loyalty, not to a product, but to layered sets of embodied relationships, local will have no holding power” (2006, 125–26). On Delind’s view, people might be less likely to participate in AFNs if they experienced AFNs in otherwise mainstream contexts, rather than in contexts like farmers markets and CSAs.

I have two responses to this worry. First, it seems to raise more of a problem for local AFNs than for Fair Trade. Even if Fair Trade scales up dramatically, it should still be possible for consumers to have the same sorts of “relationships” with Fair Trade producers as they had before. For example, consumers would still be able to read stories about agricultural communities on Fair Trade product labels; they could still go online to learn how their purchases were making a difference. Second, worries about consumer motivations are a concern only in the transitional period before AFNs have fully scaled up to replace mainstream food networks. After (most) all food is AFN food, we need not be concerned that consumers will, for lack of motivation, choose non-AFN food, since such food will not exist (or at least will not be widely available). But we might worry that the transitional period could be long. Indeed, it is likely to take longer to transition to better food systems if consumers become less motivated to participate in AFNs as AFNs scale up. This is a real worry. We may hope that advocates of AFNs will find new ways to motivate (otherwise) ethical consumers to purchase AFN foods when AFN markets extend beyond short and small contexts. For example, the state might subsidize AFN foods with the aim of lowering prices for consumers. Or AFN advocates could partner with corporations to use advertising to cultivate loyalty toward AFN products and brands.

We may have greater reason to worry about the *behavior of the businesses* that participate in scaled-up AFNs. If alternative food expands by partnering with large for-profit corporations, the partner corporations may coopt and dilute the ethical agenda of alternative food in the name of greater profits and market share. Advocates of AFNs may think they can use corporations to promote ethical goals. But the truth may be that corporations will use alternative food to increase profits, while sacrificing the broader agenda AFNs were supposed to be advancing.

There is some evidence that this sort of cooptation has occurred in the case of Fair Trade. Recent increases in corporate participation in Fair Trade have

been accompanied by increased corporate influence on Fair Trade certification schemes. Jaffee and Howard nicely illustrate the problem:

The development of the international fair trade system is ... [a story] ... of partial capture of the alternative by large commercial participants who have engaged with it at only token levels, the weakening of standards by those market forces, the distancing of key governance bodies from the producers they ostensibly serve, and the dilution of the movement's transformative power and its relational character. (2010, 391)

Here, Jaffee and Howard reflect on the fact that recent expansions of Fair Trade have tended to focus only on providing a price premium to the developing world's producers, rather than on the broader goal of establishing more just trading relationships between developed and developing societies. This sort of worry about corporate dilution and cooptation applies to other alternative food practices too. For example, in the case of local food, large corporations may focus exclusively on the geographic nearness of production, at the cost of the broader goals of local food security.

This is a powerful worry. If corporate partnerships dilute the goals at which AFNs aim, then corporate cooperation will be directly counterproductive. We may respond to this worry by observing that some governance models and regulatory schemes do a better job than others of mitigating cooptation and dilution. And we should hope that political institutions will ultimately use their coercive power to prevent corporations from coopting and diluting the ethical agenda of AFNs. Furthermore, the fact that cooptation and dilution are possible (even likely) is not sufficient reason to refuse to embrace corporate cooperation. When we make decisions under conditions of uncertainty, we often ought to make choices that could lead to bad outcomes, if those choices also have decent odds of having good outcomes. But, of course, this raises the question of whether corporate cooptation of AFNs is likely to be significant enough to prevent AFNs from accomplishing their political and ethical goals. I don't know the answer to this question. Depending on the answer—and depending on how tolerant AFN advocates are of different kinds of risk—we will have more or less reason to worry about the corporate cooptation of AFNs.

3. Revolutionary Food Justice

What if it were objectionable, in principle, for AFNs to cooperate with corporations? I have in mind the idea that AFNs aim to end neoliberal economic globalization and to create a world in which local communities of worker-owned collectives control the food systems in which they participate. Accordingly, advocates of AFNs ought to resist corporate cooperation because they ought not to lend support to the capitalist systems that they are (or that they should be) aiming to dismantle. These sorts of anticapitalist commitments seem to motivate participants in “food sovereignty” movements, which fight against the various ways

that transnational agricultural corporations cause environmental destruction, cultural degradation, and economic insecurity (see, e.g., Schanbacher 2010). For example, under the leadership of La Vía Campesina, advocates of food sovereignty have embraced

the right of peoples to define their own food and agriculture; to protect and regulate domestic agricultural production and trade in order to achieve sustainable development objectives; to determine the extent to which they want to be self-reliant; to restrict the dumping of products in their markets. (La Vía Campesina. 1996)

This is a call for local communities in the developing world to have economic power over food production, and for corporations to get out of the food business (see, e.g., Rosset 2006). According to this conception of the goals of AFNs, it is intrinsically counterproductive to sacrifice the short and small attributes of AFNs, since being short and small is necessary to resist the harms of global capitalism.

Another way of putting this objection points to ways that short and small AFNs may reduce the alienation consumers sometimes experience in mainstream food networks. While mainstream corporate agriculture hides the economic relationships between producers and consumers, AFNs are supposed to make the structure of these relationships clear, so we can better understand our mutual dependence on those who participate in our food systems (see, e.g., Reynolds 2002). For example, we may hope that a Fair Trade certification scheme “demystifies the conditions of production and establishes social relations between consumer and producer” (Naylor 2014, 277). The worry is that scaling up AFNs may make them just as obscure as mainstream food systems and, therefore, useless in efforts to reduce consumer alienation.

My first reply to these sorts of worries is that objections that are based on commitments to revolutionary justice may reflect excessive utopianism. Ideas about justice are always utopian; they point to a better world than the one in which we live. But I think ideas about justice ought to be *realistically* utopian, where this means that they are based on plausible theories of politics and moral psychology. In particular, I think it is unreasonable to demand that global food systems consist primarily (or exclusively) of bands of small producers with short supply chains. And, for that reason, I think the sort of revolutionary purity that may motivate resistance to corporate cooperation with AFNs likely relies on an unrealistic idea about our ultimate political goals.

But perhaps I am wrong to doubt the realistic possibility of a world of small-scale postcapitalist food networks. After all, there is no clear method (or standard of evidence) for proofs of the possibility of utopian projects. Even so, an anticapitalist refusal to cooperate with corporations faces the objection that we might do more to alleviate suffering, or to protect the environment, or to promote the well-being of workers, if we cooperated with large corporations, even if these forms of cooperation would not exist under conditions of justice. To use

the language of contemporary political philosophy, our nonideal theory might direct us to act in ways that do not move us directly toward the world imagined by ideal theory (see, e.g., Sen 2009). In particular, if partnering with large corporations allows AFNs to better promote environmental sustainability, food security, and the well-being of agricultural workers, then there is a very good reason to support these cooperative efforts, regardless of what our ideal theory says about the desirability of large corporations. Furthermore, some amount of alienation may be a reasonable price to pay to achieve important goals.

4. Alternative Food Aestheticism

Some of the values associated with small-scale and short supply chain AFNs seem to be *aesthetic* values. Here, I mean much more than the trivial fact that alternative food (like all food) may generate bodily pleasure. Instead, I mean that some forms of alternative food provide opportunities for pleasurable experiences that engage sensory, emotional, and cognitive faculties in an especially rich way. I have in mind aesthetic values that are made possible by the distinctive forms that alternative food sometimes takes, that is, pleasures that arise from the consumer's more direct engagement with producers or with the natural world, or from the more deliberate practices involved in collecting and preparing foods from AFNs. Rather than say more about the attributes of alternative food's various aesthetic values, it may help to turn to some examples.

Consider how lovely a leisurely Saturday morning at the farmers market can be. You have a series of short conversations with local farmers, butchers, bakers, and makers of artisanal crafts. But you are there for more than food. Michael Pollan writes that “[s]omeone is collecting signatures on a petition. Someone else is playing music. Children are everywhere, sampling fresh produce, talking to farmers. Friends and acquaintances stop to chat” (2010). When you get home, you make a meal from the food you purchased at the market—perhaps some cheese, lettuce, chicken, pastries—and you reflect on the stories (and the people) to which each of these products is attached. As you gather around the table with your family and friends, you reflect on the fact that this immediate fellowship is made possible by your participation in an even broader community, one which includes your local food producers. This is a beautiful way to live and eat.

A similar sort of alternative food aestheticism is possible in the case of Fair Trade. Here, consider a person who delights in finding a Fair Trade product with which she resonates. Should she purchase Arabica beans grown by a small community of peasants in Alto Jequitibá, Brazil? They are building a school this year. Perhaps she should buy chocolate from a small town in Ivory Coast? One of the town's residents, Kouame Fasseri, has answered questions from customers on the Fairtrade Foundation's website. He shares that “[m]y wife has been ill on many occasions, and because of Fairtrade . . . I am able to pay for her

medication and treatment” (Fairtrade Foundation 2014). The following reflections from a Fair Trade consumer are illustrative:

My family uses fairly traded staples . . . from their original packaging rather than placing in storage containers. In this way, we have a constant reminder of the source of our food. Looking at the picture of [producer] Mario Fernandez and reading of the transformation in his family makes me feel very good indeed about the experience of coffee making and drinking. (Gould 2003, 343)

Gould enjoys attaching names and faces to the “poor farmers” who receive stable prices (and development grants) as a result of his purchases of coffee, chocolate, and other Fair Trade goods. This consumer experience—of more-direct connections with poor farmers and agricultural workers—makes him feel especially good. To be clear: Gould likely values Fair Trade goods for more than merely aesthetic reasons. He may also “feel very good indeed” because he believes it is morally commendable to consume Fair Trade goods. But this possibility does not detract from the likelihood that aesthetic values play a role in his (and other consumers’) choices about AFNs.

Other aspects of small and short AFNs may have aesthetic value, too. For example, consider someone who performs a weekly twenty-mile drive through rural agricultural land to pick up his CSA box at a small farm. Among other things, he enjoys the pastoral vistas along his drive, and he is further pleased by the fact that his participation in a CSA helps to preserve the farmland and orchards he enjoys looking on. (This person has followed Pollan’s advice to “eat your view” [2006, 258]). More generally, the fact that current forms of alternative food are often inconvenient may also be a source of aesthetic pleasure. An alternative food aesthete may think of “finding, preparing, and preserving food as one of the pleasures of his life rather than a chore” (Pollan 2006, 259).

I won’t attempt to offer a list or a taxonomy of the ways AFNs can give rise to valuable aesthetic experiences. But it might help to make the following distinction. On one hand, small and short AFNs can give consumers (better) access to what they aesthetically appreciate. If the supply chain were longer, we might not meet the farmer; if the farms were bigger, we might not be driving to the farms. On the other hand, consumers might appreciate the small scale or short supply chains in themselves. For example, someone might appreciate their (small) farmers market or they might think it is beautiful that the food they bought at the farmers market was picked that morning (i.e., that it has such a short supply chain).

People who focus on the aesthetic values associated with small and short AFNs may not realize the potential for conflict between these aesthetic values and the other goals they want AFNs to promote. However, some ways of scaling up AFNs may not promote the sorts of aesthetic values that AFN participants are attached to. For example, shopping for local food at Wal-Mart

may be boring and ugly, compared to shopping at a farmers market. And Fair Trade coffee that comes from large plantations—and from nameless/faceless workers—may not inspire the same affective response as does the coffee that Nicholas Gould buys from Mario Fernandez. And if it is convenient to purchase organic produce and humanely raised meat, then a consumer may miss out on the various (aesthetic) pleasures to which inconvenience sometimes gives rise.

To be clear, scaling up AFNs is unlikely to prevent anyone from having the valued aesthetic experiences I have been discussing. Small and short forms of AFNs are going to continue to exist even when, for example, Wal-Mart sells lots of local food. The worry is that a world with scaled-up AFNs will be a world that retains lots of the aesthetic *disvalue* of today's mainstream food systems. Wal-Mart can be an ugly and unpleasant place to shop. Large monoculture farms can be boring and soulless, compared to small family farms. Corporate supply chains involve plenty of ugliness and soullessness, too, from tractor-trailers on the highway to cubicle office drones doing the work of Big Food.

In response, some people who participate in contemporary forms of AFNs are not motivated by (the same) aesthetic values. They may think there is something beautiful (or at least not very ugly) about Big Food. For example, they may find aesthetic value in monoculture farms, with their seemingly endless fields of uniform crops. And some people may not care much at all about the aesthetic values of short and small AFNs. For example, Alison Alkon studied two farmers markets, one in a wealthy white community, and one in a poor and predominantly black community (Alkon 2008). She found that participants in the farmers market in the wealthier community emphasized the value of interpersonal encounters surrounding “natural” food (along the lines of the Pollan quotation I included earlier in this section). In contrast, Alkon found that participants in the poorer community's farmers market were less motivated by aesthetic experiences, but were more focused on ethico-political goals, including food security and racial justice.

Also, we may worry that some of the aesthetic values embraced by AFN advocates are tied to problematic forms of social life and, for that reason, are less valuable than they may seem to be. For example, in the United States (at least), the aesthetic of the inconvenient homemade meal is wrapped up with broader (objectionable) ideas about middle-class motherhood. Along these lines, Michael Pollan has written that cooking healthy foods from scratch is “a bit of wisdom that some American feminists thoughtlessly trampled in their rush to get women out of the kitchen” (Pollan 2009). Caitlin Flanagan, a regular contributor to *The Atlantic*, adds that feminists in the 1970s thought that “[c]ooking nourishing dinners was an oppressive act” (Flanagan 2007, 175).⁴ Taken in isolation, there need not be anything wrong with an attachment to the “pleasures of inconvenience” people can get from their participation in small and short AFNs. But, given the broader context, we should be suspicious when people valorize inconvenient food. And we should (at least) hesitate when we consider whether

a commitment to keeping AFNs inconvenient is a good reason to prevent AFNs from scaling up.

I suspect that most advocates of (scaling up) AFNs do not imagine there to be any conflict between the ethical and aesthetic goods they associate with AFNs. Perhaps this is because their aesthetic judgments are informed by their ethical commitments: they think morally good things (like those they associate with AFNs) are also beautiful. Or perhaps their thinking goes the other way, and they have a tendency to believe that beautiful things are also morally good. Regardless, the pressing question is whether ethical consumers could permissibly resist efforts to scale up AFNs on the grounds that scaling up AFNs would sacrifice aesthetic values. One way to put the question is to wonder whether the moral reasons that count in favor of scaling up AFNs are sufficiently stringent to require the sacrifice of the aesthetic values that are attached to small and short forms of AFNs.

Someone might argue that some of the moral reasons to scale up AFNs are not especially weighty. For example, the duty of beneficence and the natural duty of justice to create just institutions are not stringent moral duties. Among other things, this means that a moral duty to assist others or to create just institutions does not require people to surrender their attachments to especially valued life activities. In particular, we have a personal prerogative to pursue (and to protect) aesthetically pleasurable alternative food practices, even if we would better alleviate the world's suffering (or better promote the establishment of just institutions) if we surrendered our attachment to these practices.

I think this is a fine argument, but it has two significant limitations for use in arguments against scaling up AFNs. First, a personal prerogative could justify protecting only those personal pursuits to which one was *deeply* attached. However, it is not clear whether many of today's alternative food aesthetes firmly identify with alternative food aestheticism. For example, I suspect that very few of the people who enjoy going to the farm for their CSAs would be significantly disturbed if they (or others) could no longer do so. Second, I think that a personal prerogative, for example, to prioritize one's prized life projects more than reductions in the suffering of others, may mitigate the demands of beneficence and a natural duty of justice, but may not do much to mitigate other moral considerations. For example, a personal prerogative (to protect aesthetically valuable aspects of small and short AFNs) may not be sufficiently weighty to block duties of repair and fairness that count in favor of scaling up AFNs.

Finally, our thoughts about potential trade-offs between aesthetic and moral values should be sensitive to whether people can realize the benefits of promoting AFNs through other means, for example, by giving to particular charities. For example, if someone could discharge a duty of fairness by donating directly to organizations that work to develop more democratic international institutions, then she might be morally permitted to resist scaling up AFNs for aesthetic reasons, on the grounds that she addressed the concerns that count in favor of scaling up AFNs through other means (see, e.g., Walton 2013).⁵

5. Epistemic Values

Many have argued that the mainstream food system would likely be unable to operate if people knew how their food was produced (see, e.g., Singer and Mason 2007). By contrast, the relative transparency of AFNs may seem to be among their chief virtues. If AFNs allow consumers to know how their food is made, then consumers can use their purchases of alternative food to promote various goods and to avoid participation in various bad practices. And the existence of short supply chains between small producers and individual consumers may seem to be a necessary condition for the transparency of AFNs. You might have to know your farmers to know that they are being treated well, or to know that the price premium you are paying for alternative food is actually doing some good (either in your local community or somewhere across the world). To use a term from Sonnino and Marsden (2006), direct exchanges in AFN contexts encourage “active trust,” in contrast to the unreflective “passive trust” conventional food systems cultivate.

But it is not only direct face-to-face transactions that are supposed to make this sort of knowledge possible. Renting, Marsden, and Banks (2003) argue that proximity-based short food supply chains (e.g., local food served at restaurants) may also cultivate trust, as may certification-based and reputation-based schemes (e.g., Fair Trade). In the case of Fair Trade, one may be far removed from the persons who make one’s food, but the fact that the food is Fair Trade certified—and the fact that one can identify the particular communities (and farmers) whose lives are improved by one’s purchase—provides a sort of transparency that is rarely accessible in mainstream food systems.

If we grant these claims about the epistemic values of contemporary AFNs, then we can make something like the following argument against scaling up AFNs in ways that would compromise their small size or short supply chains. A chief purpose of AFNs is to promote ethical food practices in the absence of effective political institutional activity. Small scale and short supply chains help individuals to see whether the AFNs they are participating in are promoting ethical food practices. Therefore, small scale and short supply chains help individuals see whether AFNs are fulfilling their purpose, and whether participating in AFNs will be a means by which they may discharge their duties. Accordingly, we should resist methods of scaling up local food that would compromise the short and small aspects of AFNs, since we should resist efforts that undermine our ability to know whether we are discharging our duties.

This is not as strong an argument as it may appear to be. First, it is unclear whether small and short AFNs are necessary for the epistemic goals that this argument presupposes. That is, it is not enough to show that short and small AFNs may help one to learn about one’s food. For the argument in favor of preserving short and small AFNs to work, it must also be the case that one cannot acquire this sort of knowledge other than through short and small AFNs. But why should we think that?

I think our experiences with various sorts of institutions provide us with good reasons for believing that a producer does not need to be small (or have a short supply chain) in order for us to learn whether it is operating justly, safely, or efficiently. For example, I think that few people believe that you must get to know the people who pick up your garbage (or who work at the transfer center and landfill), to assess whether they are being treated justly. In the case of justice for sanitation workers, what seems to matter is whether their working conditions are subject to appropriate institutional accountability. Of course, one reason to support AFNs is that political institutions have so far failed to provide this sort of accountability for mainstream food networks. But it's unclear why we should think that political institutions will be unable to provide that kind of accountability in the future, or that there are no other institutions that will be able to do so.

Defenders of small and short AFNs may respond that even if it is *possible* for consumers to get good information through scaled-up AFNs (e.g., through certification schemes), it is *less likely* that they will do so. Even if we grant that people could get trustworthy information from certification schemes, perhaps some people will be deceived by untrustworthy certification schemes or will otherwise receive bad information. Once AFNs partner with large corporations, it may be less likely for people to get good information.

In reply, I think we should be careful not to overstate the epistemic potential of (more) direct interactions. Consider what Michael Pollan says about the way local food consumers can assess the safety of their food: "Instead of looking at labels, the local food customer will look . . . the farmer in the eye" (Pollan 2006, 257–58). Pollan seems to think that face-to-face interactions with farmers and conversations with other customers will sometimes be sufficient to determine whether particular producers are acting ethically. But I think this is overwhelmingly wrong; it mistakes epistemic confidence for knowledge. There is abundant evidence that human beings have a psychological predisposition to endorse information we acquire in face-to-face transactions (see, e.g., Kunda 1999). But the fact that we are disposed to be overconfident about the information we acquire directly tells against relying on these interactions as sources of knowledge. That is, we have a good reason to check the judgments we form through face-to-face interactions against data-driven third-party reports, for example, certification schemes and institutional reports. We ought not to prioritize direct connections as a source of knowledge about the work that AFNs are doing.

To be clear: There may be many epistemic benefits of small and short AFNs. But I am not convinced that larger and longer AFNs must be less transparent or trustworthy, or that it is epistemically deficient to rely on the trustworthy reports of certification agencies or other institutions. And I am skeptical about the confidence AFN advocates place in the judgments they make on the basis of face-to-face interactions with farmers and other AFN producers.

But what if direct relationships between consumers and small-scale producers help to generate forms of knowledge that need to be widespread for a

political community to function well (Thompson 2010)? There are a variety of ways of putting this point, but at their core is the claim that participants in flourishing political communities will be connected to each other and to the land in ways that generate valuable forms of knowledge. For example, people who know their farmers, and who have a direct connection to the food system, are supposed to develop a sense of their dependence on nature and a commitment to environmental sustainability. And part of knowing your farmer is being regularly exposed to your farmer's (supposedly) virtuous habits and good character traits.

I think this is a potentially powerful kind of argument, but I am not able to adequately respond to it here. However, I will offer a couple of preliminary responses. First, it does not seem like Fair Trade does much to help people "know their farmer" in ways that could develop consumers' virtues, so the supposed epistemic virtues of the agrarian ideal seem to count less against scaling up Fair Trade than against scaling up local food AFNs. Second, whether the value of "epistemic closeness" with food production counts against scaling up AFNs depends on there being something special about food and food systems. And it is not clear to me that food is special.

I am willing to grant for the sake of argument that a citizen's commitment to environmental sustainability, social responsibility, and civic virtue depends on the existence of direct epistemic relationships between consumers and *some* producers. But why should citizens have to know *farmers and agricultural workers*, in particular, to receive this benefit? Can't we get similar epistemic benefits from direct connections to people who make our clothes, or who harvest the wood for our homes, or who treat our drinking water? Food production is no more connected to the land, or necessary for life, or part of human culture than these other kinds of production. Surely, the people who grow and harvest our food are no more virtuous than people whose labor provides us with water, clothing, and housing. To be clear: I understand the aesthetic appeal of the agrarian society, that is, one in which agricultural production is a prominent part of civic life. (I talked about some of these aesthetic values in the previous section.) But I am not so sure that the agrarian society has uniquely valuable *epistemic* attributes.

A defender of small and short AFNs could respond by calling for comprehensive downsizing of systems of production and distribution, on the grounds that political communities require close connections between consumers and producers *of all kinds*. But the ideal of a tight-knit community of producers and consumers is a radical departure from contemporary (and, indeed, historical) systems of production and distribution. (Garum consumers in Roman Judaea surely knew next to nothing about manufacturing conditions in southern Gaul, where their favorite fish sauce was made.) It is unclear what such a society would look like or how we might make progress toward it, and so it is difficult to know how much weight to give to this ideal in our deliberations about how best to address contemporary injustices in food systems.

6. Conclusion

My work in this article has been preliminary and provisional, since a full account of our reasons for scaling up AFNs depends on empirical facts and moral arguments that are beyond the scope of this article. For example, environmental concerns might (not) count in favor of scaling up some forms of AFNs, depending on the consequences of (scaled-up) AFNs and mainstream food for the environment. (Some have argued that geographically shorter supply chains are better for the environment [McKibben 2008], but others have argued that producing and distributing imported foods can often emit *less* carbon than producing and distributing local foods [Weber and Matthews 2008].) Accordingly, there is much more work to be done before we can be confident about whether and when we should support efforts to scale-up AFNs.

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Notes

¹ Navin (2014) includes a more extensive discussion of moral reasons people may have for participating in AFNs.

² This paragraph draws on Renting, Marsden, and Banks (2003).

³ Reynolds (2012) quotes from an earlier draft of FT USA's *Fair Trade for All* statement that is no longer present on the FT USA webpage.

⁴ For a broader discussion, see Matchar (2013), which was my immediate source for the preceding quotations.

⁵ Furthermore, we might worry that AFNs are not good means for promoting the goals ethical consumers are pursuing. If they are not, then we have even more reason to think AFN consumers needn't sacrifice aesthetic values or embrace AFNs with aesthetic disvalue to scale up AFNs (see, e.g., Kurjanska and Risse 2008).

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