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Resistance and Innovation In the Evolving Urban Food System of Monterrey Mexico

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Background and Context

Monterrey is the capital city of the state of Nuevo Leon in Mexico. Historically it is the leading industrial city of Mexico, with a strong history of foreign direct investment. Located in the northeastern part of the country, its proximity to Texas has fostered its status as a modern cosmopolitan metropolis. The past couple decades have been characterized by a history of violence, but that is now diminishing as citizens' groups are "taking back our city". The hot and arid climate of the region meant that, as the metropolis developed, it had to rely on some importation of food from other parts of the country.

Analytical Framework

The paper investigates the emergence and development of innovation and resistance in the regional food system of the Monterrey metropolitan region. Without ascribing any functionalist properties to the agrifood system, the paper uses the concept of an agrifood value chain and its ancillary components to analyze the ways in which the regional agrifood system has developed and changed during the past several decades. Specifically the paper investigates the changing relationships between:

- primary production (farm, ranch, garden)
- processing
- wholesale distribution
- retail sales
- commercial and institutional food service
- final consumption

The analysis acknowledges that these relationships are embedded in a dominant culture and an influential economic system, but at the same time the paper investigates the ways in which technological change and policy change have made possible the emergence and elaboration of innovative forms and processes in the regional agrifood system.

Finally, the analysis takes account of the fact that the agrifood systems exists at multiple spatial scales (local/regional, national, global) and that these spatial scales partially coincide with organizational scales (local businesses, national firms, transnational corporations).

Overview

Sixty years ago, the agrifood system of Monterrey was characterized by a mixture of regional production and the importation of food from other regions. The core urban area of Monterrey was surrounded by a rural hinterland of agricultural towns and villages. Foodstuffs flowed from these towns and villages, and from other parts of the country, to small neighborhood markets. A few local grocery stores were patronized by the small upper class and emerging middle class. Central food markets in the city were places where seafood, fruit and other specialty items could be purchased.

This structure of small neighborhood markets and stores, and several central markets, persists at the present time. The neighborhood *mercaditos* and *tiendas* provide staple foods to the lower income working classes in the city. In these markets one finds beans and squash and maize (the three sisters), rice, chicken, chorizo, and snacks. The small scale traders in these markets procure their goods at the local mercados. Some of the foods in these markets are produced in the region, and some come from other parts of the country or other countries, either in Central America or overseas.

Roughly 30 years ago, a second agrifood subsystem became prominent in the Monterrey region. This subsystem consisted of national and, increasingly, international supermarkets/hypermarkets that sold food to the rapidly growing middle class and smaller upper class in Monterrey. This “modern” agrifood system consisted of familiar names like Walmart, Sams and Costco, and also less familiar names like Soriana and Chedraui. These stores provided a full range of national and international foods, fresh fruits and vegetables, fresh and processed meats, fresh and frozen fish and seafood, fresh baked goods, and wine, beer, and liquor. As has happened in other countries, these retail stores were able to structure relationships with food producers and wholesalers on terms most favorable to retail capital.

The transnational retail chains are paralleled by national/transnational restaurants that replicate the restaurant chains in the U.S. – McDonalds, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Chili’s. Like their counterparts in the U.S., these establishments procure their foods from national and international markets.

Within the past ten years a third agrifood subsystem has emerged in the Monterrey region. This emerging alternative food subsystem of small shops, periodic upscale markets, and restaurants sells traditional/locally/organically/cooperatively/ecologically/artisanally produced food to a growing segment of middle and upper class consumers. This emerging alternative food subsystem includes health oriented stores, specialty shops (meat, fish), restaurants emphasizing food with these attributes, and local producers/processors (cheese, tamales). To some extent these establishments are located in specific neighborhoods identified with the associated lifestyle. Although the emphasis is on local and regional, some sourcing is distant (e.g., U.S.). As has been observed in other countries, the labor relations in this subsystem range from professional and craft relationships to exploitative forms of compensation. The AFS does emphasize food that is healthy and local, and that exemplifies simultaneously traditional indigenous, Hispanic, and Mexican cuisines.

Points of Analysis

The paper concludes with the analysis of three aspects of the alternative food subsystem.

First, the paper investigates what factors are driving the emergence of the alternative food subsystem. These include:

- increasing environmental concern
- increasing concern about food and health
- resistance to the recent history of violence
- economic independence from the U.S.
- cultural independence from the U.S.
- lifestyle identity differentiated from the more traditional elite consumption patterns in Monterrey that tended to imitate those in the U.S.

Second, the paper investigates what influences are fostering and shaping the emergence and development of the alternative food subsystem. It is noteworthy that the focus on local food has been fostered by one of the oldest upper class restaurants in the metropolitan area. And at the same time, some of the stores and restaurants that align themselves with the alternative food subsystem are explicitly trying to incorporate foods from pre-colonial cultures.

Finally, the paper explores the apparent and foreseeable impacts of the emergence of the alternative food subsystem. On the one hand, transnational food stores are adding and highlighting more locally produced items. More restaurants are explicitly emphasizing the local sourcing of their foods. On the other hand, there does not appear to be any basis to expect that the developments in the alternative food subsystem will be transformative for the agrifood system as a whole. For example, the emergence of the alternative food subsystem is fostering the development of linkages between retailers and producers in the rural hinterland of the metropolitan area, but the hot dry climate leads the producers to use more environmentally intensive forms of production (irrigation, greenhouses); this tendency will probably increase as anthropogenic global climate change proceeds.

Conclusions

It is noteworthy that the alternative food networks are unplanned and ungoverned, but the advocates and practitioners of the alternative food subsystem are urging both more planning and more governance. Of particular interest at the moment are the emerging interactions between the three subsystems. The strategic and tactical behavior of individuals in the agrifood system helps to explain the developing structure of the contemporary and future system. For example, when the managers of food stores and restaurants decide to incorporate alternative food items in their offerings, how do they accomplish that objective?

The development of the urban food system in Monterrey is still very much in process. Alternative foods are expanding among upper class consumers and are gradually being incorporated into middle class establishments. The middle class in Monterrey continues to grow both absolutely and as a percentage of the total population, so mass consumption continues to expand. At the same time Monterrey is becoming an urban center for some indigenous cultural populations, and their foods are becoming available commercially.

In this situation, developments in the three subsystems of the urban food system in Monterrey both restructure existing flows of foodstuffs and stimulate the development of new flows of foodstuffs with alternative attributes like local, fairly traded, organic, environmentally friendly, and healthful. Efforts to develop the alternative food subsystem both tap into parts of the existing working class food subsystem, and stimulate the development of alternative segments in the middle class subsystem. Differentiation within middle class food consumers fosters the expansion of the alternative food subsystem beyond the narrow confines of upper class consumers. In these ways innovation processes operating at the level of individual growers and purveyors result in innovation in the urban food system as a whole and at the same time express resistance to the global domination of transnational agrifood corporations.