

1. Projects



Mobilities and externalities in Nova Scotia's local food movement

Ongoing research

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Local food movements argue that a reduction of food-miles has positive social, environmental and economic impacts. A full account of the costs of food production, however, needs to go beyond the path from food to plate and consider the wider set of translocal social and economic relations involved in local food production. Using a multi-method, ethnographic approach, this project examines the costs of local food production with special attention on the international labour migration that sustains Nova Scotia's agricultural sector.

Research participants

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Introduction

In Nova Scotia, the re-localization of the food system has been a key priority in the quest to support local farmers and promote food security (or access to affordable and healthy food). Two interrelated local food models at the forefront of this quest are the Farmers Market model, where producers sell locally grown food to local markets, and the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) model where consumers typically subscribe to regularly receive products from specific local farmers. Both models are regarded as contributing to the sustainability of local agriculture, reducing carbon footprints, and ensuring access to fresh, local food. This project interrogates this assumption by investigating the externalities of a system largely regarded as internally organized and determined.

At the centre of the research are three sets of actors, each integral to local food production and consumption: agriculturalists who produce; workers whose labour is required for that production; and consumers who purchase the products. Amongst workers, we can identify variable patterns of mobility and immobility, corresponding to residency status. While some of this labour is “local”, a growing number of workers are migrants who work seasonally in Nova Scotia’s food production and processing sectors, cycling between the province and their countries of origin. In the Nova Scotian context, these workers are employed on farms far from the Farmers Markets where the fruits of their labour are sold. Subsequently, the environmental and social costs of their seasonal mobility are unknown or ignored by the consumers who seek out local produce with the objective of behaving ethically and reducing their own environmental impacts.

Objectives

By drawing out and reading together the experiences, perspectives, and objectives of farmers, workers, and consumers, the researchers will map the social landscape of Nova Scotia’s agricultural sector and local food movement. Moreover, by prioritizing the labour and mobility underpinning that sector and movement, they will interrogate taken-for-granted ideas of the local—ideas that are used to promote local forms of consumption—offering a robust and nuanced alternative account of the global political economy of Nova Scotia’s local food movement, its contradictions, as well as its potential. This research will account for transitions in farming and rural livelihoods, as well as policy developments within that sector and their implications for labour recruitment and retention.

Background

Following the implementation of structural adjustment policies since the 1960s, the Canadian agricultural economy, and the local food systems stemming from it, have been increasingly dependent on international markets. With this transformation, the scale of agricultural production and distribution has increased, but its viability for individual producers has decreased. High land prices, outsized regulations, and stiff competition from agri-business prohibit aspiring farmers from entering the industry, and stifle the success of those who do. One of the few cost-saving measures available to Canadian farmers is recruiting migrant labour through Canada’s Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP). The recruitment of temporary foreign labour has become an on-going and near-permanent strategy of both the Canadian state and employers. Unlike other temporary workers, SAWP workers are generally prohibited from applying for permanent residency through the federal program, and as a result, the program contributes to the systemic, legal and normalized production of a range of precarious, or less than full, immigration statuses. Nova Scotia offers an important vantage point from which to explore the SAWP, the broader global political economy of contemporary agricultural production, and its relationship to local movements intended to foster sustainable lifestyles and equitable food systems.

Key characteristics of Nova Scotia’s food production system are: net farm income decline, a rise in debts, a strong alternative food movement, an ageing and shrinking rural population, a relatively high proportion of small farms, and an increase of farmers in the most recent 5-year census many of which target niche or specialty markets regionally, nationally, and globally. Although the majority of food in Nova Scotia supermarkets has travelled considerable distance, the region is home to the country’s first fair trade town in Wolfville, the highest number of Farmer’s Markets per capita in Canada, and a robust set of Community Supported Agriculture initiatives. With the popularization of the already robust local food movement in the province, many farmers concentrate their sales within Nova Scotia, shipping their goods much shorter distances to be sold and bought at Farmers Markets or through CSAs in urban and semi-urban centres.

Although a large number of farmers in Nova Scotia (who participate in local and international markets) employ migrant labour, very little is known about their rationale for doing so, particularly in light of widespread, long-standing patterns of rural un- and under-employment. There is also little insight into the experiences, labour conditions, and migration histories of those who arrive to cultivate and produce

the food that makes its way to markets that are (localized or globalized) increasingly out-of-reach for economically marginalized rural Nova Scotians. Finally, little is known about how consumers who try to "eat local" think and feel about the labour practices and processes on the farms that produce their food, relative to the environmental, economic and nutritional concerns that may motivate their choices.

Research questions and hypothesis

One hypothesis is that this research will generate a complicated picture of the local food movement in Nova Scotia, as the researchers anticipate that most consumers of local agricultural products will not have a sense of the conditions and labour underpinning their food consumption despite being framed in terms of progressive politics. They also expect farmers will be ill-equipped to deal with the complex challenges presented by local iterations of a globally formulated neoliberal capitalism, and as such, rely on the strategies made available to them by the Canadian state through the SAWP: using the labour of vulnerable mobile populations.

This project will attempt to provide a complete account of the costs of local food, inclusive of the social (that is, economic, ecological, cultural, biographical, familial) impacts of its production and consumption. The more specific guiding research questions, likely to expand or change along the way, are as follows:

- What are agriculturalists' recruitment practices in Nova Scotia? How have these changed over time and why? (What shifts in policy and production have accompanied these transitions?)
- What kinds of farms sell at Farmers Markets and CSAs (conventional, organic, etc.?) Do these farmers identify as part of a local food movement transforming the food system? Why (not)?
- What marketing strategies are used to cultivate interest in and commitment to local food production and consumption in Nova Scotia?
- What motivates migrant workers to participate in the SAWP?
- What is it like to work as a seasonal agricultural worker on a Nova Scotian farm?
- How do SAWP workers contribute to social reproduction of their families in their countries of origin?
- Why do Nova Scotians shop at Farmers Markets or subscribe to CSAs? How much do they know, and care, about the conditions under which their food is produced?
- Can the local food movement meet the aims and needs of producers, consumers, and those who work the land, cultivate our food, and bring it to market? How can this be accomplished?

Research design and methods

This project will produce a detailed, ethnographic study on the role of foreign labour in the production of Nova Scotian foods. Despite their frequently localized emphasis and the specificity that they produce, ethnographic case studies offer important insight into globalized dynamics and processes. With an analytical lens that integrates both local and global scales, this research simultaneously focuses on the in situ practices that constitute Nova Scotia's local food movement, and on the externalities that underpin and connect that movement to systems, structures, and hierarchies beyond the province's borders.

More specifically, qualitative and quantitative methods will be used to capture the perspectives and experiences of Nova Scotian farmers involved in the local food movement, those who work for them (both migrant and non-migrant), and those who consume the commodities they bring to market. Where farm labour is concerned, the focus will be on individual workers, their histories of labour mobility, their transnational livelihood projects, and their experiences in Nova Scotia. In-depth interviews will provide insight into the social, familial, and personal costs and benefits associated with circular labour mobility. They will also make it possible to examine informants' experiences of social, ecological and economic change over the course of their lives. Where consumers are concerned, the focus will be on Farmers' Market shoppers and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) subscribers. Interviews with key market

stakeholders will be conducted, as well as approximately 500 exit interviews with consumers at Farmers Markets across the province and surveys with CSA subscribers. These interviews will highlight consumer objectives, rationales, and practices related to local food consumption. Through this combination of data, the goal is to discern the extent to which consumers and participants in local food initiatives take into account realities and relationships that extend beyond the province's borders.

Additionally, media coverage of the SAWP program in Nova Scotia, as well as local food initiatives and ad campaigns in Nova Scotia will be collected and analyzed.

Claims to originality

The research will help fill a crucial gap in local food movement, rural and agricultural scholarship, by drawing together the experiences and actions of consumers and producers to address "questions about who is doing the work that allows others to consume".

It will also offer much needed insight into the experiences, effects, and conditions of the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program in Nova Scotia.

The proposed project will advance the fields of labour, migration, and food studies beyond their typical methodological and analytic frameworks to investigate the experiences of migrant workers in "local" food systems. The first of its kind in scale and scope, the project deploys mixed methods to explore and analyse the paradoxes of the local food movement in Nova Scotia, with an emphasis on the social and ecological externalities of that movement.

By incorporating consumers as key actors in the political economy under study, this research will help break open the "black box of consumption" that has plagued local and alternative food scholarship. Thus, more than a narrowly focused case study of the SAWP, the research's methodological approach and theoretical framing allows to effectively interrogate the global political economy of a food production system that is frequently defined by and for consumers in terms of its localism.

Finally, the project will complicate the picture of local food in Nova Scotia by researching the conditions and labour underpinning its production and reproduction, analysing how local foods are portrayed in ads and media, approaching scale as a strategy, and interrogating food movement assumptions about the local.

Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

En savoir plus x

Movement

Movement is the crossing of space by people, objects, capital, ideas and other information. It is either oriented, and therefore occurs between an origin and one or more destinations, or it is more akin to the idea of simply wandering, with no real origin or destination.

En savoir plus x

Associated Thematics :

Lifestyles

- Living environments
- Diversity of lifestyles
- Proximity
- Work

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