

MANUFACTURING MEANING ALONG THE FOOD COMMODITY CHAIN

Introduction and research context

Recent food and farming controversies such as BSE, Foot and Mouth Disease and the debate about genetic modification have increased the political significance of current concerns over food provenance, agricultural policy, retail restructuring and public health. Such issues highlight the need for research that enhances our understanding of the links between production and consumption, that brings together a cultural analysis of food production and consumption practices with an examination of the political-economy of food, and that is attuned to the historical roots of contemporary debates.

This project seeks to address these issues by means of a 'commodity chain' approach to food provision and consumption. Our approach is both *person- and product-centred*, examining commodity chains of varying length and complexity. We apply an innovative method -- life histories -- to this topic in order to 'humanise' our understanding of the food chain, interviewing those involved in food production and marketing at various points along the chain. We also use archival and documentary sources, supplemented by policy-focused interviews, to examine the agencies and institutions that seek to regulate the food chain. Our analysis aims to understand the collective significance of these individual biographies and corporate actors in terms of recent economic, regulatory and technological changes in food production and consumption. By tracing commodity chains of different length (from local to global) we seek to render their political and ethical dimensions more transparent, consistent with the recent White Paper's aim of enabling consumers to make more confident choices and informed decisions (DTI 1999). While our work takes Britain as its initial focus, a commodity chain approach encourages us to explore a series of wider transnational geographies and more complex histories which have the capacity to unsettle conventional ways of thinking about Britishness (Crang & Jackson 2001).

Commodity chains

Commodity chain analysis seeks to trace the links between production, distribution, marketing, advertising and sales for specific commodities. Since the pioneering work of Hopkins and Wallerstein (1986), Fine and Leopold (1993) and Gerrefi and Korzeniewicz (1994), there have been numerous attempts to map the commodity chain of a wide range of products including coffee, cut flowers, gold, and home furnishings (see Jackson 2002 for a review of this literature). A commodity chain approach emphasises the inter-connections between different sites within the production-consumption nexus rather than over-emphasising any single site. It offers a valuable means of understanding the dynamics of contemporary consumer society, tracing connections between people and places that may be quite distant from one another. Commodity chains are politically contentious as producers may try to disguise the length of chains in a desire to promote regional or national distinctiveness, or they may highlight questions of provenance as a way of promoting quality or reliability. Consumers may be highly knowledgeable about the origins of particular commodities (as with the committed 'ethical consumer' who makes great efforts to investigate the conditions of production of particular foods) or they may be totally indifferent to questions of appropriation and exploitation. A commodity chain approach addresses these questions empirically rather than through any *a priori* assumptions (Jackson 1999).

Our approach to commodity chains seeks to move beyond a linear understanding of the relationship between production and consumption. Chains are rarely single-stranded, with

clear origins and end-points, and other metaphors, such as circuits, networks and webs, are increasingly preferred (Leslie & Reimer 1999; Reimer & Hughes, in press). Recent critiques of the commodity chain approach (e.g. Raikes et al. 2000) have urged researchers to pay more attention to issues of historical depth and coverage, the inclusion of agricultural as well as industrial products and the better handling of regulation issues. The life-history approach to food provision adopted here seeks to address all of these issues, providing greater historical depth to our understanding of contemporary commodity chains and exploring how they change (even across one or two generations) in response to changing institutional and regulatory frameworks.

Our theoretical approach draws inspiration from Appadurai's (1986) analysis of the 'social life of things' and particularly from Kopytoff's (1986) biographical approach to commodity culture. While Appadurai places a clear emphasis on material culture, tracing the cultural significance of 'things-in-motion', our approach is both *person- and product-centred*, aiming to map the dynamics of particular commodity chains. Nor do we see chains as purely mechanical devices, based on a disembodied, rational calculus. A life-history approach attempts to 'humanise' commodity chains by understanding the multiple subjectivities of those involved in food production (all of whom, of course, are also consumers in their own domestic lives). These are acknowledged strengths of a life-history approach (Perks & Thomson 1998). The method's potential weakness of over-emphasising individual agency is addressed in this proposal by placing individual biographies within a wider analysis of the dynamics of political regulation and institutional governance.

Political economy

Since Friedland's pioneering work on 'manufacturing green gold', the idea of tracing commodity chains has become an important component of political-economy approaches to food (cf. Friedland et al. 1981; Arce & Marsden 1993; Bonnano et al. 1994). During the 1990s, researchers sought to periodise the evolution of chains and systems through notions of food regimes and the associated transition from Fordist to post-Fordist production-consumption relations (Goodman & Redclift 1991; Goodman & Watts 1997). More recently, attention has shifted to the pivotal role of food chains in the development of more liberalised world trade arrangements. Each phase of food industry restructuring is argued to have inherently spatial dynamics and implications, with current debates focussing on globalised food systems and the potential for developing more 'localised' alternatives. In the British context, while systems of provision are becoming increasingly internationalised, it is at the European level that food and farming policy is being increasingly framed. On the one hand, the CAP is set to remain the mainstay of agricultural policy for Member States well into the 21st century, although its rationale is likely to be significantly altered (Lowe & Ward 1998). On the other hand, EU single market concerns increase the pressure to formalise and codify the links between product and place (Ilbery & Kneafsey 2000).

Our approach in this project is to bring together an understanding of how these wider political-economic forces impact on those directly concerned in the process of food production and to trace their effects on contemporary discourses and practices of food consumption. We will take two current policy developments to explore the changing institutional and policy context for the food commodity chains in our study. The first is the current Mid-Term Review of the Agenda 2000 reforms (for 2000-6) to the CAP, due for agreement in February 2003. This is expected to further the shift in emphasis in the CAP from supporting the *quantity* of food production to supporting the *quality* of production

systems. The second is the operation in the UK of EU Regulations 2081/92 and 2082/92 to protect food and drink products with special character or geographical origin. These developments together could be understood as an attempt to strengthen policy support for food provenance and food quality concerns in new ways. What weight and significance do such interventions carry with actors at various points in food commodity chains, and with what potential effects?

The political economy perspectives adopted in this study are not intended simply as 'background and context' for the life histories, but as an organising framework through which individual actors' lived experiences of changing discourses and practices in food commodity chains can be examined and understood. Such a combined approach has considerable potential in bringing together political-economy and socio-cultural perspectives as is now being widely canvassed (cf. Jackson 2002).

Aims and objectives

Specifically, our research aims:

- to explore how the meanings of different commodities are produced by a range of social actors at different points along the commodity chain;
- to understand how these meanings vary for different products with commodity chains of different length and how the chains are shaped by different regulatory bodies and institutional actors; and
- to examine how these meanings are 'consumed' at the individual/household level.

The range of meanings to be investigated include questions of geographical origin and provenance; ideas of scale (local, metropolitan, national, transnational); constructions of culinary authenticity; notions of environmental justice and social ethics; and the links between particular food products and specific consumer identities and lifestyles.

Our objectives are:

- to contribute to current debates about the theoretical significance and empirical utility of commodity chain analysis in geography and related social sciences; and
- to employ an innovative life-history, focus-group and interview-based approach to 'humanise' our understanding of commodity chains and to make the workings of the chain more 'transparent' to consumers.

Relationship to previous work

Besides the work mentioned above, our project seeks to build on the findings of previous ESRC-funded research including *The Nation's Diet* programme (Murcott 1998) and the 'Eating Places' project (Cook & Crang 1996). The current proposal also builds on previous work by the applicants including an ESRC-CASE award (held by Polly Russell – the project RA -- and supervised by Jackson and Perks) on British food and culinary culture. This project contributed to the National Life Story Collection's current project on 'Food: from source to sales-point', with the NLSC acting as the CASE partner. Prior to her PhD, Ms Russell worked in product development for Marks & Spencer gaining valuable commercial experience and a network of useful contacts. The project also builds on Ward's past work on pesticide regulation and his recent work for the Cabinet Office on agricultural policy reform; Jackson's recent work (with Crang and Dwyer) on transnational commodity culture in the food and fashion industries (funded via ESRC's Transnational *Communities* programme); and Jackson's current ESRC-funded project (with Clarke and Hallsworth) on 'Retail competition and

consumer choice'. Jackson also has experience of life-history research through his Leverhulme Trust-funded work on changing ethnic identities in Bradford (Smith & Jackson 1999).

Research questions

The following questions will guide the proposed research:

- How useful is the 'commodity chain' concept in analysing the changing dynamics of food production and consumption?
- What does a life-history approach add to our conceptualisation of food chains (in terms of 'humanising' our understanding of the chain and increasing the historical depth of our analysis)?
- What are the main characteristics of the life-history narratives of food producers and how do they differ from public discourses about food consumption?
- How are these narratives and discourses shaped by wider political-economic forces, particularly the institutions involved in the regulation and governance of food chains?
- To what extent are questions of culinary authenticity and geographical provenance connected to public concerns about food quality and risk?
- How does the length of the commodity chain impact on food choice and quality, and are there significant differences between different modes of production and different food products?
- What is the scope for improving consumer knowledge in order to facilitate more informed food choices?

Research design and methodology

Given the focus of previous academic studies and the current level of political interest in the quality and reliability of food (cf. Raven et al. 1995; Marsden et al. 2000), our research concentrates on *commodity chains within the retail food industry*. Our strategy involves the selection of firms and products with chains of varying length, from the shortest (local produce sold at nearby farmers' markets) to the longest (goods whose material and/or symbolic geographies extend over thousands of miles, such as 'exotic' fruit and vegetables or 'Indian' ready-meals).

We have selected a number of firms with whom we have already-established links as the most viable point of entry to a wide but manageable range of products. If access is denied or withdrawn at any stage, a number of alternative companies have been identified with similar characteristics. The proposed case study firms include small-scale family-based producers of organic beef and lamb who sell their goods directly from the farm and through local farmers' markets. At the next scale we include firms (such as Baxter's) with a strong national (Scottish) identity who sell a range of own-label products (including jams and soups, but also Thai curry sauce) through a variety of national and international retail outlets. We also include a national manufacturing conglomerate (such as Samworth Bros.) with a strong emphasis on traditional British products (including pork pies and own-label sandwiches), sold via national retail outlets. Finally, we include a high-street multiple (such as Marks & Spencer) which maintains a strong national reputation as a safe and reliable retailer (Winship 2001) despite their use of global supply networks. Typical products here include a variety of own-label ready-meals (including 'Indian' curries and 'Japanese' sushi) as well as fresh produce (such as fruit and vegetables). Our selection of sample products is designed to include a wide range of commodities from fresh produce (organic meat, fruit and veg. etc.) to highly processed goods (such as chilled oven-ready meals and cooking sauces). This range of goods will allow us to tap into different discourses of national/transnational identity, constructions of 'authenticity'

and the ‘exotic’, issues of environmental justice and social ethics, and questions of public safety, health and risk.

We intend to carry out 40-50 life-history interviews across the case study firms (4-5 with the smaller producers, 15-20 with the larger firms); to conduct 8-10 focus groups (each covering a range of products); and to interview 8-10 key figures in relevant institutional/policy contexts. All of the interviews and focus groups will be taped and transcribed. Analysis will follow the methods we have employed on previous ESRC-funded research (Holbrook & Jackson 1996; Jackson 2001), designed in this case to draw out the connections between individual and institutional dimensions of different food commodity chains.

Our research design and methodology is best represented diagrammatically (see below). It involves:

- the selection of *case study firms* with commodity chains of varying length and *sample products* (including organic and non-organic produce, ‘British’ and ‘exotic’ foods, fresh produce and highly processed, chilled and/or frozen goods);
- *life-history interviews with a range of social actors at different points along the commodity chain* (with some overlap between products where, for example, a marketing director or product developer will be able to talk about more than one product);
- *focus group discussions with consumers* about the meanings they attach to different products; and
- *policy-focused interviews* to supplement archival research on relevant institutions and agencies concerned with the regulation and governance of food provision.

Case studies	Sample products	Life-history interviews	Consumer focus groups	Policy-focused interviews
Small-scale producers selling directly from the farm and via local farmers markets (e.g. Enford Farm, Blandford, Dorset)	Organic beef and lamb (recently converted from non-organic production methods)	To include (across the case studies, where relevant): Farmers, Suppliers, Millers, Butchers, Salesmen, Buyers, Technologists, Product developers, Manufacturers, Brand managers, Packaging staff, Marketing and advertising executives, Distributors, Retailers, Lobbyists, Etc.	To include a wide range of consumers encompassing: Demographic/ social variations (e.g. age, class, gender, ethnicity) Variations in economic and cultural capital (e.g. education) Regional variations (e.g. Scotland, London, Leeds/Sheffield) Urban and rural contrasts	To include representatives of: DEFRA (Marketing, Competition and Consumers Divn.), DTI (Consumer Affairs Divn.), Food Standards Agency, Commission on the Future of Farming and Food (Cabinet Office), NFU, Soil Association, Sustain (Food Chain Project), British Retail Consortium, National Consumer Council, Etc.
Regionally based family firm with strong national identity (e.g. Baxters)	Soups, jams and Thai curry sauces			
National manufacturer (e.g. Samworth Bros.)	Sandwiches and cakes, pork pies and other meat products			
National retailer with extensive supply chains and global markets (e.g. Marks & Spencer)	Ready meals (including Sushi and Chicken Tikka Masala) and fresh fruit and veg.			

The life-history interviews will take a broadly biographical approach to the respondents' involvement with food, aiming to set their professional knowledge within the context of their wider personal and social experience. Life-history interviews are in-depth and typically extend over several hours, involving repeat visits and the development of a close rapport between interviewer and interviewee. (Our RA, Polly Russell, has extensive experience of the method through her PhD research, funded via an ESRC-CASE award.) The focus groups will be used to identify shared experiences of food, to establish differences within and between social groups, and to characterise the range of contemporary public discourses about food. The policy interviews will be informed by an analysis of relevant documentary evidence, drawing on industry sources and archival data including the British Library's unparalleled collection of 'grey literature' (<http://www.bl.uk/services/document/greylit.html>).

Ethical issues

Our approach to research ethics is consistent with the high professional standards established by the NLSC in the development of its extensive collection of life histories. Throughout this process, appropriate arrangements have been established for anonymising data and protecting interviewees' confidentiality. These arrangements will apply to all aspects of the current research (including the life-history interviews, the focus groups and policy interviews). Participants in the research will be asked to give their written consent and informed of their right to withdraw at any stage of the interview process. We shall also follow the guidelines on *Copyright* and on *Confidentiality and informed consent* drafted by the ESRC's Qualitative Data Archive, based on advice from the law firm Allen & Overy.

Timescale, dissemination and outputs

Funding is sought for 30 months, with the RA appointed for the full period and fieldwork concentrated in the first 18 months (when Jackson and Ward are both due for 6-months research leave). The next 6 months is designated for data analysis and the final 6 months for writing up and dissemination to academic and other users.

All of the life histories that we collect as part of the project will be deposited with the NLSC at the British Library where, subject to interviewee consent, they will be publicly available via the BL's on-line catalogue (at <http://cadensa.bl.uk>). We have also budgeted for the development of an interactive Web-based educational resource, using the life-history interviews and focus group material, for use by school teachers, students, the media and food industry researchers. It will be modelled on the BL's highly successful 'Voices of the Holocaust' website (<http://www.education.bl.uk/projects/voices/main.htm>) and will form part of the BL's 'Living Words' project.

Presentations will be made at national and international conferences including the Association of American Geographers, the Royal Geographical Society-IBG and the Oral History Society. Papers will be submitted to the appropriate journals, such as *Oral History*, *Transactions IBG*, *Journal of Historical Geography*, *Society and Space*, and *Food and Foodways*. We have also budgeted for the preparation of jargon-free research briefings (for policy users) and plan to hold two 'user workshops'. The first will be near the beginning of the project (to encourage users to participate fully in the research); the second will be at the end of the project (to disseminate our findings to the appropriate policy communities).