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How milk does the world good: Vernacular sustainability and alternative food systems in post-socialist Europe

Diana Mincyte

ABSTRACT

Scholarly debates on sustainable consumption have generally overlooked alternative agro-food networks in the economies outside of Western Europe and North America. Building on practice-based theories, this article focuses on informal raw milk markets in post-socialist Lithuania to examine how such alternative systems emerge and operate in the changing political, social, and economic contexts. It makes two contributions to the scholarship on sustainable consumption. In considering semi-subsistence practices and poverty-driven consumption, this article argues for a richer, more critical, and inclusive theory of sustainability that takes into consideration vernacular forms of exchange and approaches poor consumers as subjects of global history. Second, it revisits practice theories and infrastructures of consumption approaches to consider ruptures, discontinuities, and historical change in infrastructures as a way to account for inequalities and experiences of marginalization.

Introduction

In recent decades sustainable consumption has emerged as an umbrella term for a wide range of institutional arrangements, policy instruments, and market practices that seek to address environmental and socio-economic issues by transforming consumption. In the European Union (EU), it has become particularly important in that the key environmental governance approaches have included sustainable consumption as one of their developmental agendas. The underlying logic behind this approach is that consumers can use their shopping to signal their social and environmental values, and by so doing, can make an impact on production and agro-environments (Barnett et al. 2005; Furlough and Strikwerda 1999; Micheletti 2003; Cohen et al. 2005; Spaargaren and Cohen 2009). The frequently cited examples of alternative agro-food systems include international fair trade networks, Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs), farmers markets, small-scale and local organic food production, constituting a small, but visible sector of agriculture.

While sustainable consumption is generally perceived as a global project that takes into consideration environments and labor relations around the world through consumer led initiatives, such as international boycotts of brands and products (Michelletti 2003) or fair trade networks stretching across continents (Lyon and Moberg 2010), current scholarship on the socially and environmentally sustainable consumption is rather limited continuing to focus on Western European and North American contexts. The vast majority of rigorous theoretical work on this subject has been based on case studies in France (Battershill and Gilg 1998; Sanches 2005; Willis and Campbell 2004), the Netherlands (Martens and Spaargaren 2005), the UK (Seyfang 2006; Weatherell et al. 2003), the US (DeLind 2002; Alkon 2008), and Sweden (Micheletti 2003) to name just a few, while entire continents such as Africa, Asia, and South America have been conspicuously missing in the debates (cf. Spaargaren and Oosterveer 2010; Kandachar and Halme 2008; Oosterveer et al. 2007; Spaargaren and Mol 2008). Even if it is widely acknowledged that changing consumer culture and procurement practices in the fast growing economies of Brazil, China, India, and Russia are transforming global environments in fundamental, if not irreversible ways, most of the debates on sustainable consumption remain disconnected from the issues in the Global South.

At the heart of the issue of sustainable consumption in the “developing” world lies a set of assumptions about globalization. First, scholars considering consumption outside of Western economies recognize that fundamental economic inequalities shape local consumption-production-distribution systems (Portes et al. 1989; Ong 2006; Castells 2000; Freidberg 2003a). Using a powerful critique of globalization as an extension of colonialism through exclusion, polarization, and the exploitation of peripheries, scholars show that local consumers are forced into shopping at the cheapest global food retailers (Sobal 1999, 2001; Weismantel 1999, 1988; Freidberg 2003b). Second, media studies scholarship suggests that with the accelerating flows of information, goods, capital, labor, and technologies, and especially, with increasing Westernization of the media in other parts of the world, local societies are seduced by the luxury promises of Western consumerism (Heyman 2001; cf. Orlove 1997). What follows are disastrous levels of pollution and waste produced by increased levels of consumption of cars, household appliances, technologies, furniture, and clothing,

fundamental changes in land use brought about by suburbanization, and major transformations in everyday diets that rely on foods produced on large-scale industrialized farms and delivered through long chains of supplies.

Despite their fundamentally different views on globalization, the two approaches converge into an agreement that the deepening liberalization of global markets places both producers and consumers in the poorer parts of the world in a subservient position, depriving them of agency to be civically engaged in the economy and to exercise ecological citizenship. James McCarthy, in his overview of the geographies of alternative agro-food systems, makes this point succinctly by stating that the alternative forms of consumption are often unavailable in the “developing” nations, since the power to change local economies “remains in the hands of consumers, certifiers, and retailers in the North” (McCarthy 2006, p. 809; Freidberg 2004).

While such an approach highlights global inequalities, it also reproduces them by presenting sustainability as a moral obligation on the part of affluent consumers, effectively rendering poorer groups and, especially those living in global peripheries, as passive recipients of sustainability agendas. It is certainly true that world’s richest countries consume at rates that are an order of magnitude higher than these in poorer nations and hence benefit from unfair labor relations and exploitative use of nature (Crocker and Linden 1998; Cohen 2001; Sayer 2003; Middlemiss 2010). In applying principles of redistributive justice, it seems appropriate to call on these consumers to curb their consumption, change lifestyles and pay the real price by making more ethical choices. Yet, it is precisely in zooming on the wealthiest nations, consumers, and their particular consumption practices that other regions, social groups, and their consumption and production arrangements are erased from both scholarly and public debates on sustainable consumption, and sustainability, more broadly.

One of the ways out of this conundrum is offered by the practice-based theories that emphasize performative and infrastructural aspects of consumption in addition to ethical and moral dimensions of consumer decision-making. Such an approach broadens sustainable consumption studies to consider a wider range of practices beyond the study of consumerism that may or may not be mediated through monetary exchanges, barter, a combination of the two, or as gifts. Often invisible from the outside, alternative

consumption practices emerge as local responses to transformations in the larger socio-economic domains brought about by globalization and liberalization of agro-food sectors. They include semi-subsistence economies, informal and gray markets, short commodity chains, and various kinship and locality based food procurement arrangements. Although these consumption practices may not be comparable in terms of scale to industrialized agro-food sectors, they play an important role in how globalization is reconstituted and experienced locally by marginalized groups and also what kinds of agricultural landscapes and practices they support. Practice-based approaches, in other words, allow us to rethink agency in sustainability models as distributed across a wide range of actors, beyond consumers who can afford to make ethical decisions.

Building on theories of practice, this article examines a case of alternative raw milk network in post-socialist Lithuania in the late 1990s and 2000s. By examining how the informal dairy networks surfaced in the context of globalization of post-socialist Eastern Europe and considering local infrastructural transformations, I seek to develop two lines of inquiry. First, I explore how these alternative agro-food networks were constituted and what factors impacted their emergence: What material, social, economic and political arrangements were implicated in the proliferation of informal markets? How were they formed and how did they fit in the existing infrastructures? Second, I examine how agency, meaning the capacity to act and make an impact on the surrounding world, was constituted and experienced at the peripheries of European markets. What kinds of political and economic subjectivities are produced in these alternative systems of production and consumption? How do the consumers define their place in the increasingly liberalizing markets and the Europeanizing governance institutions in post-socialist societies? And more broadly, what are the implications of considering these poverty driven alternative agro-food systems for European definitions of sustainability?

Drawing on practice theories, this article underscores the role that the organization of urban spaces, subjective experiences of time, and historical trajectories play in the emergence of alternative food economies. Although the raw milk economy in Lithuania is not driven by moral and/or explicitly political imperatives to improve the environment or to protect one's body from risks that underlie green consumption practices in Western Europe, I argue that participants in these networks nevertheless are

engaged in what K.J. Gibson-Graham (2006) calls diverse economies and that they build alternative economic subjectivities, constituting creative—and potentially sustainable—responses to the liberalization of global markets and industrialization of agriculture. More broadly, this article seeks to broaden the scope of the theory of sustainable consumption by including *vernacular*, or locally existing, forms of economic exchange and approaching poorer consumers as subjects and agents in global history.

In pursuit of these arguments, the following two sections will provide a brief overview of the debates at the nexus of sustainable consumption, social practice, and agency as well as sources of data employed in the study. In the next section I provide a short overview of the informal raw milk economies in Lithuania. Moving onto the analysis of the paradigmatic changes in the systems of provision in Lithuania in the 1990s, the following three sections show how the raw milk economy emerged in the context of the changing post-socialist urban landscape, diverging experience of time, and acute awareness of the deepening social isolation. The article ends with a summary of the findings and concluding reflections.

Sustainable consumption in the globalizing world

The existing theory of sustainable consumption tends to focus on the political and moral aspects of consumer behavior as driving forces behind alternative markets. In the burgeoning literature on alternative agro-food networks, the questions of what moral responsibilities consumers should bear and how economic transactions could be re-connected to the local ecologies and communities take central stage. It has been argued, among other things, that alternative food systems can be seen as sites through which consumers express their political will (Michelletti 2003; Stolle et al. 2005), as social movements (Starr 2010; Baker 2004), re-embedding practices (Hinrichs 2000, 2003; DeLind and Bingen 2007), or moral economies (Jackson et al. 2009). Building on the concept of ecological and/or food citizenship, sustainable consumption in these contexts has also been defined as a way for exercising political agency and morality across distances and time (Seyfang 2006; Lockie 2009).

This positive reading of consumption has been criticized for obscuring exploitative relations to nature and labor in capitalism (Allen 2004), disregarding

exclusionary politics implicit in the notions of “community” and “locality” (DuPuis and Goodman 2005) as well as replacing participation in public politics with shopping (Szasz 2007). In the same vein, a number of scholars have argued that the current rhetoric of alternative agro-food systems is laced with contradictions between individual profit seeking goals and proclaimed commitments to collective well being, social justice, and long-term environmental sustainability (Maniates 2002). Finally, the inherently liberal notion of a (virtuous) consumer with a right to choose freely has been criticized for disregarding structuring factors that shape consumption (Guthman 2002; for a different set of arguments, see Miller 2001).

In the light of these critiques, the practice-based approaches suggest rethinking consumption as set in broader infrastructures, subjectivities, cultural formations, and power relations (Fine and Leopold 1993; Shove 2003; Spaargaren 2003, 2011; Southerton et al. 2004). This school of thought is indebted to the practice theories of Pierre Bourdieu, among others, who, through the notions of field and habitus, emphasized the reproduction of social order in performing daily tasks and routines. Since the 1980s, these approaches gained recognition, culminating in what some scholars call as the “practice turn” in social theory in the 2000s and the early 2010s (Knorr-Cetina et al. 2001). In the context of consumption studies, rather than considering individual consumer values and moral considerations as motivating factors, such an approach suggests that consumption practices flow from the organization of material infrastructures and everyday life, while agency is distributed along social and political networks and technological infrastructures.

Writing against a “mentalist” framework, practice-based research emphasizes the performative aspects of consumption by examining how objects of consumption are “domesticated” and normalized to become integrated into the daily routines of consumers as well as how these material objects play in the reproduction of social relations (see Theodore Schatzki, Andreas Reckwitz, Elizabeth Shove). In this approach, alternative agro-food networks become possible only when food procured in these markets becomes “anchored” into the existing regimes of consumption, including transportation technologies, availability of space and refrigeration systems, high income levels, food habits, cultural preferences in the household, and existing social norms. Through a

number of case studies in Western Europe such as Sweden, UK, the Netherlands, and France, this school of thought has built empirically rich and conceptually nuanced understanding of consumption as a daily habit, material infrastructure, and a set of social, cultural, and economic relations (Shove et al. 2007; Shove 2006; Southerton et al. 2004).

Despite of the understanding of how agency and social and political infrastructures are intertwined with material objects, however, the practice-based approaches have not been able to account for the major disruptions in the systems of provision. By focusing on routinization, this line of research has dealt only with relatively minor changes in infrastructures such as the introduction of new technologies or change in service providers (Southerton et al. 2004; Van Vliet et al. 2005) that do not compare to the complete ruptures, disjunctions, and revolutions that often undergird consumption infrastructures in the “developing” world.

In East Europe, for example, the socialist systems of provision underwent major transformation in the early 1990s, including a move from state to private property, from socialist to capitalist mode of production, and from highly supervised socialist agro-food sector to liberalized and globalized food markets to protectionism under the EU. In the backdrop of these complex, multi-layered transformations, the emergence of informal agro-food networks intersected with major disruptions in energy provision, ownership rights, and legislative institutions as well as the replacement of social and political structures that constituted the Soviet state with capitalist institutions.

By taking disruptions and history as starting points in the analysis of infrastructures of consumption gives us a deeper understanding of what happens when infrastructures collapse and how they are built from the ground up. As the case study presented in this article suggests, labor and production are key components in the making of new infrastructural connections. Working to maintain their livelihood, poor consumers act as co-producers who put their time and labor in food provisioning. Additionally, the focus on disruptions highlights structural violence and subjectivities—particularly experiences of marginalization, poverty, and social isolation—that are central for such systems of provision. Because when material infrastructures collapse, so do social institutions, relationships, and moral economies. It is precisely their experiences of

alterity and risk of falling below the levels of subsistence that push the participants to look for alternative sources of sustenance.

Data and research

The case study presented in the following sections tracks the history of disruptions in the infrastructures of consumption and the ways in which these disruptions were accommodated, resisted, and lived with in local contexts, considering spatial, temporal, practice, and subjectivities dimensions of these adaptations. In terms of data collection, to understand the rich cultural, economic, political, and social contexts that produced local raw milk economy in Lithuania, I used ethnography. This methodological approach captures the multiplicity of the social and material contexts that shape everyday consumption practices (Douglas and Isherwood 1979). This article uses only a fraction of ethnographic data collected in Lithuania in the period of 15 months starting in 2003 by focusing on consumption sites in three cities: Kaunas (population: 360,637), Panevezys (population 115,315), and Marijampole (population 47,356) (see Department of Statistics 2007).

More specifically, throughout this research I interviewed over 100 respondents. As is common in ethnographic research, I used snowballing techniques to recruit the respondents. I began with semi-structured interviews with five people whom I had already known and asked them to introduce me to others. Having spent weeks waiting for milk deliveries and socializing with consumers and farmers, I was able to interview the widest possible range of participants, starting with young housewives and ending with retired doctors and engineers. The vast majority of informants, slightly under 80 percent, turned out to be women. Such a skewed number in terms of gender is not surprising given that vast majority of participants in these alternative food networks are women (Mincyte 2009). Most of the informants in cities and villages were coming from the lower and lower-middle class, living on fixed incomes. 30 percent of urban consumers I interviewed had college education, while 10 percent had not completed high school. Many of the interviewed urbanites had worked in Soviet factories as workers and administrators and in service industry, as nurses, cooks, accountants, secretaries, office assistants, or cleaners. About 90 percent of all the urban consumers were retirees, many of whom

would have preferred to stay in labor force, but were asked to retire or could not find a job for years.

Most of my research time went into observing consumers waiting in line for the farmer, participating in heated discussions, and conducting semi-structured interviews in the homes of consumers. Additionally, my research involved observing and working with semi-subsistence farmers, meeting with certified organic producers, interviewing governmental officials in the Ministries of Agriculture and the Environment, non-governmental organizations, managers and workers from three milk-processing companies, and collecting and analyzing formal reports about dairy production, processing, and distribution from government and popular media. Through a three-stage iterative analysis of the data, I searched for shared themes and commonalities across different data sources. Such a methodology is consistent with analytic induction principles developed by Florian Znaniecki (1969) and Michael Burawoy (1998).

The raw milk economy at a glance

A careful observer walking in Soviet style apartment districts in post-socialist Lithuania will notice strange gatherings of eight to a dozen older women and men lingering by the benches near the buildings and holding empty jars in their hands. Such get-togethers are the dairy delivery points where farmers from the surrounding villages bring fresh raw milk along with other dairy products—sour cream, milk curd, or farmer’s cheese—and sometimes some seasonal vegetables for sale. After the car of the farmer arrives, everybody gets in line and the farmer pours milk into the jars from large containers delivered in the trunk of their vehicle. Only after all the milk is poured and other products are distributed, the farmer collects money from their buyers whom they often address as “neighbors.” Living within about 10 to 15 miles from the city, a single farmer typically provides dairy to about 50 to 70 urban households. They usually travel two delivery routes on alternate days and each delivery route consists of about three to five stops.

Prices for the products from the farmers are generally lower than those of the dairy in the stores. In summer of 2008, the cheapest liter of milk in stores was about \$0.69, while a liter of raw milk from the farmer was about \$0.48. In addition to the obvious financial incentives, the raw milk economy has emerged as an important site of

socialization for the older generation of urbanites who have time to wait for the farmer and who seek to consume what they consider as “wholesome” foods from the countryside.

It is important to note that despite the lack of technological resources, all cows and fodder in Lithuania are tested according to the EU food safety and public health regulations. Yet, the raw milk economy is illegal because sales take place in the unauthorized locations and because the farmers do not have the refrigeration systems required for the transportation of perishable foods. While it is legal to sell milk directly to the consumers, Lithuanian government requires that sales take place either directly on the farm without potentially exposing the milk to different contaminants through transportation or delivered to the approved and certified raw milk sale points at local markets and supermarkets. The Departments of Food Safety and Epidemiology as well as the Veterinary Offices are the primary institutions that supervise the process by providing permits and animal health certificates.

While founded on semi-subsistence economies and poverty, the informal dairy economy in Lithuania is strikingly similar to the alternative agro-food networks in North America and Western Europe that seek to support low intensity agro-environmental practices, bio-diversity, and social justice agendas. All the milk sold to urban consumers in Lithuania comes from small-scale farms of eight to twelve hectares with two to four cows where technologies or chemicals such as fertilizers, pesticides or hormones are used sparingly due to prohibitively high prices (Ministry of Agriculture 2003, p. 18).

Furthermore, in contrast to industrialized farms that use genetically uniform animals and produce to ensure consistency of production, the small-scale producers across Eastern Europe rely on diverse local breeds (Dunn 2005; Bryant 2000). These farms also generate little waste, as most of the resources—including manure or milk surplus, are recycled right on the farm. Finally, consumers and farmers form strong bonds that stretch beyond circumscribed economic transactions to social interactions, something that could be considered an example of the Polanying re-embedding.

Shifting provision systems: socialist consumption, post-socialist changes, and the politics of repair in the early post-socialist city

Under socialism, there were three major dairy provision systems—industrialized milk, raw milk consumed by farmers and their families, and raw milk sold in unofficial markets. From the mid-1960s onward, a vast majority of urbanites in Soviet Lithuania consumed what from today’s perspective is understood as industrialized milk. Milk came from consolidated collective farms where animals fed on processed fodder, and the milk was channeled through scientific-industrial planning and accounting apparatuses before it reached the stores. Issues of safety seem to have surfaced in the early 1980s when the media discussed several cases of improper handling of milk by the milkmaids and at the processing plants, but for urban consumers alternatives were unavailable.

In the socialist countryside, however, the situation was radically different, and raw milk was available in abundance. This situation was due to the fact that the collective and state farm employees were allowed (and oftentimes required) to own cows privately and this feature of agricultural life served as an unsanctioned source of unindustrialized milk in Lithuania. The milk from these “private” cows also reached kin, friends, and acquaintances from the cities when they came to visit or to help the farmers. In a very similar way as in Eleanor Smollett’s (1989) analysis of the economy of jars in Bulgaria where jars with homemade jams moved in one direction and empty jars traveled the other way along the lines of kindred networks, fresh un-pasteurized milk from the countryside occupied a special place on the table and in the family relations of urban households in Lithuania. It should be noted, however, that because milk is much more perishable than jams, it never developed to the proportions of the Bulgarian economy of jams. Importantly, the value of raw milk was never expressed in monetary terms; it rested on exchanges based on family and kinship relationships.

In addition to the contrast between city dwellers who primarily drank industrialized milk and collective and state-farm employees who only drank raw milk, there was the third category of raw milk consumers. It consisted of inhabitants of small- to medium-sized towns where a large proportion of inhabitants either owned cows themselves (because they officially worked on Soviet farms) or had very close ties to the farmers (from whom they were able to procure milk). In both cases, they not only

consumed “private” milk at home, but also regularly sold it to their neighbors and close acquaintances for a fixed fee.¹ This category of the raw milk economy resembled the unofficial economy under socialism known as *blat* networks that were widely used to unofficially distribute rare food items, commodities, and knowledge under socialism (Ledeneva 1998). Although raw milk was not as scarce or as highly valued as foreign clothing or technology items, selling milk directly to consumers was illegal, so it reached urban homes only through personalized trust-based networks, just like those of the *blat*. Notably, this particular model of the raw milk economy seems to have changed little during the 1990s: most small town consumers who were unable to keep cows of their own continued to buy milk from their neighbors.

In retrospect, alternative dairy networks emerged in the post-socialist city as responses and lived experiences of three key infrastructural shifts in the 1990s: land privatization reforms through which collective and state farms were dismantled, the collapse of food markets in the East with the Russian crisis of 1998, and the growth of the urban poverty due to skyrocketing unemployment and the insufficient funding for social services in post-socialist cities.

The first break in infrastructures took place with the restitution of land-ownership rights and the gradual disintegration of collective farms in the early 1990s. Most of the industrialized dairy farms disappeared and animals were distributed to individual farmers along with pasture lots through a long and confusing process (Verdery 1994, 2003). Lithuanian farmers, like their counterparts throughout Eastern Europe, turned to subsistence and semi-subsistence farming as the only stable means of survival (Harcza et al. 1998; Creed 1998; Kovach 1994; Burawoy and Verdery 1999; Zbierski-Salameh 1999).

As dairy farming underwent fundamental reorganization, the milk-processing industry adjusted by setting up new milk collection points. Instead of large trucks collecting milk from collective farms, newly privatized milk-processing companies dispatched smaller vehicles to pick up surplus supplies from individual semi-subsistence farmers. For urban consumers who bought food in stores, this infrastructural change

¹ This form of milk distribution has been noted as fast disappearing in the early 1970s due to the low price and easy access to industrialized milk (Shmelev 1971; Wadekin 1973).

remained invisible. They continued to consume processed, industrialized milk as they did under socialism. The only perceptible difference was the replacement of glass bottles with milk cartons and plastic bags that allowed processing companies to cut labor, transportation and other costs involved in reusing glass bottles.

A deeper shift in the systems of dairy supply, however, took place following the Russian economic crisis of 1998, when Russia's markets collapsed and dairy exports to Eastern markets diminished leading not only to a major fall in milk prices, but also to the dramatic reduction in milk collection. Small-scale, semi-subsistence farmers were hit the hardest as their milk production was considered not as reliable as that on large-scale specialized farms by the dairy processing giants. Since the productivity of their cows was lower and it depended on the season and also because milk quality was not consistent due to irregularities in pastures and fodder, they could not meet the requirements of industrial dairy processors and, thus, were quickly shed from the industrial dairy provision infrastructures. "Inundated" by the surplus milk, these small-scale semi-subsistence farmers started actively looking for ways to sell milk directly to consumers.² Farmers who lived close to cities found themselves in an advantageous position and began delivering milk themselves to urban centers. In this respect, the sharp change in food markets caused by an economic crisis transformed the systems of provision by squeezing the small-scale producers from the industrialized dairy infrastructures and forcing them outside of the formal markets.

The third infrastructural change that facilitated the growth of the informal raw milk economy was the abrupt de-industrialization that led to the growth of poverty in post-socialist urban contexts. When the semi-subsistence farmers came to the cities they found consumers for whom raw milk was a perfect food (for the US, see DuPuis 2002). Many had been unemployed since the collapse of Soviet industries in the early 1990s and were struggling to make their ends meet living on small salaries, random jobs, and minute social security payments. For them, inexpensive milk was a godsend.

Additionally, the fact that raw milk could be preserved as cheese, yoghurt, or buttermilk allowed the consumers to diversify their diets in significant ways. Such

² In 2005, milk collection prices were about \$0.29/liter.

“plasticity” of milk use also fit the daily practices of the poor urban consumers for whom food procurement from diverse sources had become a norm. When raw milk arrived in the late 1990s, the post-socialist consumers had become semi-producers, actively engaged in the sourcing of their own food. In dealing with the lack of cash incomes, it was not uncommon for the poor urbanites to grow most of their food. Some of them rented land outside of the city, others used every square inch on their summer plots, small land allotments of about 0.15 acres adjacent to the cities that were distributed to the workers under socialism. As a product that could be preserved and consumed in various forms, milk melded well in the daily lives of the consumers who were juggling multiple food related tasks at the same time.

Not only did raw milk allow the consumers to diversify their diets, but it also opened public spaces where consumers and farmers interacted. With raw milk deliveries, urbanites, who often felt socially isolated, were eager to convene at the milk delivery points. For many, milk deliveries became the central site for learning the news, exchanging ideas, and validating rumors. This was particularly true of the older generation of retirees or half-time workers who were working random jobs and who were un-plugged from the emerging entrepreneurial networks and knowledge economies.

In their attempts to accommodate the three major infrastructural shifts—the privatization of land, the consolidation of the industrial dairy supply in the aftermath of the Russian crisis, and the emergence of the large class of urban poor—the post-socialist consumers “domesticated” raw milk and, with it, repaired their social lives. In such a manner, the informal dairy economies did not begin with social motivations, but such collective and social agendas and moral economies evolved along with the new infrastructures.

Case illustration

The life history of Lina—a consumer living in Lithuania’s second largest city Kaunas—is emblematic of the tectonic changes in consumption regimes that took place in post-socialist world and that led to the evolution of the raw milk networks.³ Lina was

³ Names and any other identifying information about informants quoted or described in this paper have been changed.

employed in the accounting department at one of the state owned construction companies under socialism, meaning that she had a secure and stable employment, owned an apartment, and led, what Lina describes as a “normal” (or “middle-class”) lifestyle. In 1994, things changed dramatically, as she reached her retirement age and had to leave her work. Not quite 60 years old and married to a man who had been unemployed for the last three years, she also helped support her two daughters with their financially-strained families. Since they owned a summer plot outside of the city, they were able to procure most of the vegetables, fruit, and berries for their own consumption and that of their grandchildren. Just like many others in their summer housing community, the couple also dug up an additional, illegal, patch of land of about 0.08 acres in the city territory that was adjacent to the nearby forest. They grew potatoes, carrots and cabbage on this plot, the staples of their diets. As a consumer, she only bought a few things such as meat, butter, milk, sometimes cheese, spices, sugar, salt, and additional potatoes and cabbages for pickling. The rest came from her land and labor.

When Lina heard about her neighbor’s relative who had a farm some 13 miles from Kaunas and who was selling milk for almost half the price of that at the local store, she immediately began buying a liter of milk two times a week. While the price was the most important motivation for buying the milk, it was also very important for Lina that this milk was raw and that it contained a sizable amount of cream on top, allowing the milk to be used in diverse ways. After buying milk, Lina usually skimmed the cream to be used for sauces, soups, and on pancakes or dumplings. She also set part of the milk for making it into yoghurt or buttermilk, and on rare occasions, fermented the milk to make fresh cheese. She usually pasteurized the remainder of the milk, cooled it, and drank it with bread covered in homemade apple sauce. In such a manner, the raw milk fit her labor-intense consumption regime perfectly by supplementing her and her family’s daily nutrition with proteins and fats and also allowing her to use milk creatively and in diverse ways.

In just a few months after the farmer appeared in the neighborhood in the winter of 1998, the demand for raw milk exploded and many inhabitants of apartment building where Lina lived tried some of the farmer’s milk. The farmer’s visits became more frequent and regular. Instead of making arrangements to bring and sell milk in the

apartment of her cousin, the farmer started deliveries at one of the entrances to the building around 11:30 AM, four times a week. For Lina, this meant that she was able to plan her busy schedule better. But even more important than that was the time she was able to spend talking with her neighbors who would convene by the delivery point hours before the farmer was expected to show up. Some of the neighbors bought milk occasionally, others became regular consumers. For those actively involved in the consumer circle, milk deliveries became not only a means for diversifying diets and getting access to cheaper dairy, but also a way for socializing in public spaces in the ghettoizing urban environments, an activity that was popular among older generations during socialism and that disappeared completely after the end of the national movements in the early 1990s. Without these shared experiences and the rich social interactions that surrounded raw milk deliveries, this alternative economy would have not been possible.

Space, time, and marginalization in a post-Soviet city

The major change in the food consumption regime that took place after the fall of the Soviet Union has to be understood in the context of existing urban infrastructures, spatial configurations, and subjective experiences of time. In terms of rural landscape, 15 miles is the limit beyond which most of the farmers choose not to deliver milk to the cities. This is primarily due to high fuel prices, but also because traveling this distance everyday considerably increases the time and effort required to transport large amounts of unrefrigerated milk. Such considerations are particularly important in hot summers when milk needs to get to consumers' refrigerators fast. In this sense, distance to the cities becomes an important factor structuring the farmers' involvement in the raw milk economy.

In a similar way as rural spaces, the geopolitics of post-Soviet cities also contributed to shaping the raw milk economy. This is primarily due to the fact that most of the dairy delivery points are situated in the districts with the highest concentration of the older population—the primary consumers of the products delivered by the farmer. The concentration of older and poorer people in the same urban districts of post-Soviet cities is not accidental. The first wave of construction of Soviet apartment districts started in the late 1960s as part of the implementation of Nikita Khrushchev's plans to advance

industrialization in the Soviet Union. In the early 1960s, a relatively small provincial town of Panevezys, for instance, experienced unprecedented growth: several major heavy industry factories, including glass manufacturing, wiring and cable production, heavy machinery production, and television part manufacturing, were built. In just four years, from 1966 to 1970, the city population swelled by 30 percent. Located within walking distance to the industrial zone, the living districts became home to the new generation of the city's working class, most of whom had just moved from the surrounding villages.

Today, after the rapid de-industrialization of the 1990s, these living districts of Panevezys are still home to residents who lived through the birth, growth, and collapse of Soviet Lithuania's industry. These social groups have become marginal to Lithuania's current trajectory of development. As one informant put it:

[w]hen our district was built, we had two post offices, bus routes were readjusted to fit our needs, and a health clinic was built. Now we have to walk to downtown just to mail a letter. Our district is that of pensioners. Who cares about us any more?" (Interview 30 June 2004)

Another respondent suggests that the district is becoming a trash dumping zone:

Just look at our streets! They are so dirty. The [trash] containers are overflowing with trash. The other day I saw a furniture company truck unloading its waste into our containers. And now there is a pile of garbage that doesn't fit into the container just sitting on the street... What a horrible smell and view to live with every day... Before (under socialism) we had trucks picking up garbage regularly and people were more disciplined and cultured and did not throw their garbage out of the door (Interview 2 July 2006)

With quickly deteriorating city infrastructures, the places where the raw milk thrives seem to belong to the past of Panevezys' development, not its future.

In addition to the marginalization through the loss of urban infrastructures, the inhabitants of these older and deteriorating districts also experience disruption in their social relations. In a different way than under socialism and during the early years of post-socialism, when multiple generations of families often shared the same roof, the family habitats are now splitting along generational lines. This change means that the elderly members of urban families are losing their roles as productive members of

society—as babysitters, homemakers, or cooks. They are also struggling to support themselves: a vast majority of raw milk consumers live on fixed incomes and are finding themselves at the lower economic stratum of society. In one such delivery node in Marijampole, some of the neighbors are widowed women, others live alone or with their spouses, and an overwhelming number of them have very limited incomes and poor health.

Elizabeth Dunn (2004) problematizes identity politics in post-socialist Poland by suggesting that the experiences of marginalization are endemic to a market economy. Dunn argues that the transfer of socio-economic models from the West and the adoption of a Western organization of work practices can succeed only by setting apart the new system from the old-Soviet one: “[F]or the flexible capitalist self to be naturalized and unmarked, certain people, practices, and aesthetics have to be made into the marked and denigrated other” (2004, p. 92). From this perspective, a perception that one is no longer needed or that one is not a productive member of society signifies the making of the underclass who begin to see themselves at the bottom of social hierarchies rather than as legitimate members of society.

It is in this socio-geographic context that the raw milk economy becomes a site for renegotiating one’s social place in the local community and landscape. Because the economic transactions take place in public spaces and because they require time for socialization among its participants, raw milk consumption emerges as a way for claiming public space. The central element in this building process is the shared experience of time.

Shared experiences of time

Although the farmers delivering milk generally try to be on time, their arrivals fluctuate in the range of about 30 minutes. Most of her consumers, however, never complain about the wait. For them, the waiting for the milk that gives them an excuse to leave their small apartments, to socialize, and to learn the local news. Many neighbors gather outside at least a half an hour before the expected milk-delivery time to see each other, engage in political debates, and talk about new stores, new foodstuffs, new medicines, new banking rules, new taxes as well as new ways of insulating windows, new detergents, and new

washing machines—everything that is flooding Lithuanian markets from Europe, Asia, and the Americas. In the context of shrinking public sociality, weakening common rituals, and ever-increasing social isolation (atomization) in post-socialist states (Creed 2002), the milk-delivery space has emerged as a limited, but important public arena in which neighbors meet as a collective and commune. In other words, at the center of raw milk consumption is an experience of social time.

In terms of the social theory of time, Katherine Verdery's (1996) classic article on the *etatization* of time sheds light on experiences pertaining to the flow of time under socialism. Verdery demonstrated that by suspending its citizens' bodies in queues for a long time, the socialist state got a better grip on its citizens. In other words, time spent in lines was literally stolen from the "private" lives of people. Ivaylo Ditchchev (2005) contradicts Verdery by arguing that, under socialism, time spent waiting actually opened spaces for socializing. It is through standing in lines for services, food, or consumer goods, waiting for buses, or lining up at doctors' offices that socialist citizens created intimate encounters, shared jokes, told stories, and more broadly learned how others operated in the regime.

The case of urban raw milk consumers seems to be similar to that described by Ditchchev: waiting for the milk provides urban Lithuanians with an occasion for socializing, where older neighbors share stories, debate politics, and learn the news. In the post-socialist context, however, the more slowly paced lifestyle of the pensioners can be understood only in juxtaposition to the increasing mobility and flexibility of the younger generations and better-off peers. As active participants in the new socio-economic system, the more dynamic members of Lithuanian society are often stretched to the limits when trying to squeeze in work, deal-making, investments, banking, reading the news, and shopping. In a broader sense, these new lifestyles resemble the practices that are prevalent in fast-paced global cities often defined by hypermobile flows of capital, commodities, information, and humans (Sassen, 1995; Castells 2000). Not surprisingly, raw milk distribution in the wealthier districts is organized in different patterns. The consumers usually pick up milk themselves from a designated location and they do that at their convenience. More recently, organic farmers markets in Vilnius—Lithuania's capital and largest city—have mushroomed where raw milk is sold at a significantly

higher price than that at the supermarket and where the wealthy display their food connoisseurship.

What is at stake here is not simply the divergence of global and local flows of time as manifested through participation in a time-consuming dairy economy, but also the opening of new forums for social time. In this sense, raw milk economies emerge as infrastructures mediating experiences of marginalization and creating collective spaces and socializing venues.

Concluding reflections

In analyzing the emergence of alternative agro-food economies in post-socialist Lithuania, this case study shows that poverty, labor, and experiences of marginalization play a key role in how poorer groups build alternative food provisioning infrastructures. This study also highlights the importance of the experiences of change in urban landscapes, social networks, and temporal subjectivities in forging new economic relationships. Unlike in the more stable systems of provision that have been documented in the current scholarship, it is disruptions and discontinuities, not routines and normalization, that best capture the subjectivities of consumers and drive their participation in alternative systems of production, consumption, and distribution. In such contexts, the boundaries between producers and consumers and labor and leisure are difficult to draw, as consumers are actively engaged in procuring their own food and ensuring subsistence. Ultimately, alternative food supply infrastructures in post-socialist contexts emerge as ways of dealing with marginalization and methodologies for constructing sovereignty in the midst of fast changing environments.

Building on the empirical case throughout this article I sought to make two arguments. First, in considering semi-subsistence practices and poverty driven consumption and production infrastructures in post-socialist Lithuania, I argued for a more inclusive theory of sustainable consumption that takes into consideration vernacular economies and broadens the concept of consumption to account for a variety of practices and subject positions.

Second, the focus on disruptions, discontinuities, and historical change in the infrastructures of provision highlighted the major shifts in social and economic relations

taking place in the post-socialist region. In exploring how these subjectivities relate to the emergence of alternative agro-food economies, this article addresses the question of alterity, or experiences of social and economic isolation in the quickly changing environments. It is in their attempts to mediate these experiences of marginalization that alternative forms of cultural, material and economic production were founded. While in the English language the two terms, “alterity” and “alternative,” share the same root, they refer to vastly different subject positions. On the one hand, alterity marks one’s experiences of displacement and exclusion, and on the other, alternative modes of production and consumption signal the capacity to act and carve out niches in the mainstream economies, and, hence, to become an agent. As the participants in the informal raw milk economies in Lithuania move between the two subject positions, from experiencing alterity to living with alternatives, they effectively negotiate the boundaries of their own agency. What remains to be seen is whether the larger political, economic and material infrastructures in the Europeanizing Lithuania will be flexible and open enough to maintain vernacular provision schemes, and, in so doing, keep alternative opens.

I would like to conclude with a reflection on the political implications of the scholarly work, particularly how it relates to the practices and people I introduced in this case study. As the models and definitions of sustainability move beyond the walls of academia to the drawing boards in governmental offices, they are materialized in specific policy and policing measures that have far reaching implications for the lives of poorer consumers and producers. In Lithuania, in its effort to promote sustainable agriculture, the EU has poured funding into organic food production, while introducing a wide range of economic and administrative measures designed to “clean streets” from illegal sellers. Following the EU directives, a new set of laws are being implemented that have defined selling uncertified food in the streets in Lithuania as punishable with fines and the confiscation of property. In the light of these new administrative measures, the police and the officials of Food and Veterinary Service have become more vigilant in their attempts to catch and punish the informal dairy producers. But when the powerful state actors—such as the government, police, and public health institutions—move to eliminate informal markets, they are not only effectively undoing the socio-economic safety nets

that the poorest citizens have built in their efforts to spread economic risks, but also dismantling alternative systems of provision, working against its proclaimed goals to build sustainable societies. A reflexive approach to sustainable consumption, thus, would be a much needed first step in recognizing and reconsidering the distribution of agency not only in terms of consumption infrastructures, but also of its own role in the making of sustainable societies.

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