



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

Research Report

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Apples, Milk, And Waste: Understanding The Environmental Implications Of Hungary's Entry Into The European Union

Relevance and Contribution to Field

- 1) The application of social scientific theories of globalization to EU presence in Eastern Europe
- 2) Through an ethnographic investigation of the relationship between food and identity a contribution to the literature on sociology of consumption and to the literature on nation and identity.

Approach and research methodology; list of research sites

ethnography:

- attendance of EU training workshops relating to environmental and food regulation
- observation and interview of farmers selling their own products on the markets of Budapest
- interview with consulting agencies in charge of accrediting Hungarian food producers (and thus making them EU-conform) in Budapest
- interviews with directors of the produce councils (apples (Nyíregyháza), dairy (Budapest) and paprika (Budapest))

- observation of dairy farm in Nyíregyháza
- interview with managers in charge of dairy plants under state socialism, Székesfehérvár
- attendance and analysis of dairy museum in Székesfehérvár
- observation of and interview with consumers on the day paprika was banned in Hungary (due to carcinogenic mold found in some batches) (Budapest)
 - 1) secondary literature analysis of
 - food industry periodicals and training manuals (National Széchenyi Library, Library of the Food Research Institute, Budapest)
 - periodicals on auditing, safety and quality management and accreditation
 - 2) document analysis of laws and regulations concerning EU-conform food production
 - 3) statistical analysis of food production historically and of food quotas

Research findings and preliminary conclusions

The European Union represents a curious mixture of neoliberal globalization (what has been described as “the race to the bottom,” and of protectionist or social market capitalism (what World Bank analysts call the “race to the top”). On the one hand the EU demands that Hungary open up its markets, on the other, it provides Hungary with a legal framework to protect brandname Hungarian food products from cheap competition. On the one hand, the EU encourages free trade, on the other it places a limit on food items produced in the Union. On the one hand the EU is against food and agricultural subsidies in the Third World and for its radical reduction for new EU members, on the other, it continues to subsidize farmers in Western Europe, creating unequal trade conditions for farmers outside Western Europe. On the one hand, the EU is for strict quality and safety standards, on the other it relaxes national standards when those are stricter than the EU’s and it disempowers national food safety authorities, which has become painfully evident in two scandals in Hungary involving cheaply imported peppers. On the one hand the EU is for preventing rural pauperization through its regional development aid, on the other, through the mentioned unfair trading conditions and through the unnecessarily strict safety and quality standards (designed for large producers and not for small, semi-handicraft industries) creates massive unemployment and welfare dependency in the Hungarian country-side.

Hungarian farmers, their representatives and many experts on agriculture view these contradictions as the evidence of the abuse of the EU’s power, which view gives rise to nationalist political tendencies. As a whole slew of professions are newly created not just to realize the EU’s food safety and hygiene standards but to be the arbiters of what constitutes good (safe and ethical) business practice, direct food producers are increasingly disenfranchised in decision-making. Consumers lament the disappearance of Hungarian food items in grocery stores, and are unsure of how the EU’s supposedly high standards are realized when imported food tastes bad, and when Hungary experiences one food scandal after another.

I am presently working on elaborating a theoretical framework that can make sense not only of the contradictory nature of Euro-globalization but also the resulting subject positions and interpretations detailed above. A key concept in this framework is

governmentality. I aim to complement this Foucauldian approach with one that does not treat subjects as always already produced but as active agents, and which, as a result, makes much use of cultural studies approaches.

Future research agendas

History of governmentalities in food production and consumption in former state socialist countries (primarily to counter the idea that state socialism lacked any kind of food regulation). (also see above and in final report)

Policy recommendations

- 1) Take into consideration local, already existing, food regulation and infrastructure aimed at collecting knowledge and making decisions on safe and ethical practices.
- 2) Diversify certificate systems for small producers.
- 3) Involve small producers in decision making on what standards are reasonable and feasible in their sector
- 4) Provide farmers with aid to apply for EU aid for sustainable agriculture though transnational NGOs, as national governments deny them on various excuses.