

Moral economies of food and geographies of responsibility

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This paper uses the concept of 'moral economy' to challenge the conventional view that defines morality and the market as oppositional terms. Drawing on evidence from life history interviews with key actors in the British food industry, the paper outlines how moral and ethical questions are articulated through notions of space and time. Using case study material from the chicken and sugar industries, the paper examines the way that ethical and moral issues are expressed through the dimensions of time (via notions of remembering and forgetting) and space (via notions of connecting and disconnecting) and via notions of visibility and invisibility. The paper concludes by examining how our understanding of the moral economies of food can be advanced through the adoption of a relational view of geographical scale and temporal connection, contrasting the attribution of individual blame with a politics of collective responsibility.

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Introduction

This paper draws on the language of 'moral economy' to examine the mobilisation of ethical and moral issues in the contemporary food industry, focusing on the production and consumption of two contrasting commodities: chicken and sugar. The paper argues that ethical issues are articulated across a variety of geographical scales and through a range of temporalities. Our argument draws on life history interviews with actors at various points along food supply chains. We argue that moral economies of food are expressed through time (via notions of remembering and forgetting) and space (via notions of connecting and disconnecting), as well as through notions of visibility and invisibility. We then draw on recent debates about the geographies of responsibility to address some of the ethical dilemmas that are raised in our empirical material, advocating a relational view of geographical scale and temporal connection.

Morality and markets are often seen as oppositional terms, one concerned with notions of care

and responsibility, the other concerned with the apparently rational and amoral calculus of price and profit. Recent commentators suggest, however, that morality and markets are mutually implicated (Jackson *et al.* 2000; Smith 2005; Kaiser and Lien 2006). While some authors have chosen to explore these connections in terms of 'cultural economy' (e.g. Scott 1997; Du Gay and Pryke 2002; Amin and Thrift 2003), we have opted for the older terminology of 'moral economy'. In its broadest sense, 'cultural economy' refers to recent transformations in social life whereby 'the economy is increasingly culturally inflected and . . . culture is more and more economically inflected' (Lash and Urry 1994, 64). In practice, however, the term is usually associated with a narrower range of knowledge-based industries such as advertising or with the 'cultural industries' in particular. While 'cultural economy' refers to 'the subtle imbrication of economic knowledge with other forms of cultural practice' (Du Gay and Pryke 2002, 3), it does so frequently without any significant engagement with the moral dimensions of economic life which are the focus of our argument in this paper.

The concept of 'moral economy' has a long and complex history, dating back to Adam Smith's foundational thinking in the mid-eighteenth century when he was working simultaneously on *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) and *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). Smith argued that economic relations cannot be divorced from moral notions of 'fellow-feeling' which we might today express through ideas of trust and reciprocity. We also draw inspiration from Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* (1944) in which he argued that the market economy and the modern nation-state developed in parallel, challenging those who argued that modern markets have become disembedded from the wider fabric of social life. Recent debates about the social embedding of economic life by authors such as Granovetter (1985) and, in the context of food and farming, Murdoch *et al.* (2000) and Winter (2003), owe much to Polanyi's pioneering work. For Polanyi, and more recent commentators such as Sayer (2004), the operation of markets depends on and influences moral and ethical sentiments, norms and behaviours. From this perspective, 'moral economy' emerges as the study of how economic activities of all kinds are influenced and structured by moral dispositions and norms, and how those norms may be compromised, over-ridden or reinforced by economic pressures (Sayer 2000, 2).

The historian E P Thompson (1971) used the concept of 'moral economy' in his account of the moral basis of pre-industrial food riots. Recent work in agri-food studies has also become increasingly interested in the moral and ethical aspects of contemporary food systems and especially in how ethics shape the development of new and 'alternative' forms of production-consumption networks (see, for example, Maye *et al.* 2007; Clarke *et al.* 2008). In Britain, these debates have been stimulated by the experience of recent 'food scares' and farming crises, which led to calls for the 're-connection' of producers and consumers (Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food 2002), together with a 'quality' turn in food studies and an emphasis on 'local' production – developments that each contained their own ethical assumptions (Goodman 2003; DuPuis and Goodman 2005).

Similar debates have occurred elsewhere. North American sociologist, Clare Hindrichs (2000) uses the concept of social embeddedness to explore comparatively the social relations of farmers' markets and community-supported agriculture (CSA). She shows how farmers' markets create conditions for closer social ties between producers and consumers,

yet remain fundamentally rooted in commodity relations, while CSA schemes represent an attempt to construct a new, ethically-driven alternative to the market. In economic geography, Roger Lee (2000) has explored the social character of economic activity through an analysis of small-scale horticultural nurseries in Britain, drawing particular attention to the 'economic geographies of regard' (following Offer 1997), founded on mutual interests and knowledge, which are involved in the production and consumption of garden plants. Kirwan (2004) has reviewed how the notion of embeddedness has been utilised within agri-food studies, drawing distinctions between strategies that create alterity, valorise local assets or are simply commercial appropriation. A debate has ensued between those who argue that ethically defined alternative food networks (AFNs) represent a radical and significant departure from conventional food systems and those who regard them as an incremental and niche phenomenon, rooted in the lifestyle preferences of particular social groups. Typically, research in this vein has focused on AFNs, rather than on 'mainstream' food commodity chains. One exception has been the work of Lawrence Busch (2000), who has employed the concept of moral economy in his analysis of the normative dimensions of grades and standards for food (see also Thompson 1996). Morgan *et al.* (2006, 5) also use the concept in their study of place, power and provenance in the food chain, arguing that a moral economy perspective could significantly enrich the agri-food literature. Finally, Le Heron and Hayward (2002) have traced the articulation of moral values in the development and marketing of breakfast cereals, while Trentmann (2007) uses the language of moral economy to provide an historical perspective on the ambivalent consumer politics of food in the modern world.

In what follows we attempt to apply these ideas to the moral economy of two contrasting commodities, chicken and sugar, drawing on life history interviews with key actors along their respective supply chains. We return subsequently to the wider argument about consumer ethics and geographies of responsibility.

Moral economies of chicken and sugar

Our research explores how the meanings of different commodities are produced and negotiated by a range of actors at different points along the supply chain. We investigated how these meanings

vary for products with chains of different length and complexity. In the case of chicken, for example, we compared free-range chicken sold direct to the public at local farmers' markets with more complex and highly processed 'ready meals' sold via large retail chains. For sugar, we examined both the domestic sugar beet industry and the importing and processing of foreign-grown sugar cane, comparing apparently simple (though highly refined) products, such as a bag of granulated sugar, with more complex products where sugar is incorporated as an additive in a variety of processed foods and drink. In each case, we sought to examine how the chains were shaped by different regulatory bodies and institutional actors and how the meanings of these commodities were marketed and consumed. While chicken and sugar are very different food products, we argue that they can be usefully compared in terms of their materiality, meanings and forms of market regulation (see Table I). There are more obvious comparisons for each product (chicken

with beef, for example, or sugar with salt). However, we wish to show that our argument about the moral economies of food can be applied to products as apparently diverse as chicken and sugar.

We argue that the manufacture of meaning along these commodity chains can be appropriately addressed in terms of 'moral economy' because their culturally defined norms and socially contested meanings have direct commercial consequences. We have referred to this process, elsewhere, in terms of the concept of 'food stories', inspired by Susanne Freidberg's (2003, 4) argument that in the advertising-saturated conditions of the global North, food is increasingly 'sold with a story'.¹ Work on commodity chains is normally concerned with identifying the points along the chain at which value is added and profit extracted (cf. Jackson *et al.* 2006; Challies 2008). Our project contributes to a growing body of work that takes a more qualitative approach, designed to understand how the social and cultural meanings of food are shaped as products

Table I Comparative commodity geographies of chicken and sugar

	<i>Chicken</i>	<i>Sugar</i>
Materiality	An animal, ideally suited to intensification Its organic properties can damage human health if improperly stored or cooked Sourced from the UK and abroad (Brazil, Thailand, continental Europe etc.) Highly intensified production and industrialised processing	A plant; 'the grass that changed the world' (O'Connell 2005) Inert in its processed form, can be stored safely without risk of deterioration for months Sugar cane imported from African, Caribbean and Pacific countries; sugar beet grown in UK (especially East Anglia and Lincolnshire) Highly industrialised processing and manufacture
Meaning	Premium attached to British chicken White (breast) meat the most valued Dangers of food poisoning from <i>Campylobacter</i> (Lawrence 2004); fear of avian flu spreading to humans (Davis 2005); animal welfare issues (RSPCA, Compassion in World Farming) Consuming chicken meat regarded as a luxury until 1960s; now the most popular source of protein Consumer confusion over battery hens (kept for eggs) and broiler chickens (raised for meat) Constant improvements in feed: weight ratios Technological innovation (the 'cold chain') allowed shift from frozen to fresh chicken consumption	Less consumer concern about provenance; 'sold like cement' Whiteness of refined sugar associated with purity Public health concerns over tooth decay, diabetes and obesity: 'pure, white and deadly' (Yudkin 1972) Deeply implicated in history of slavery and Empire Campaign groups lobbying for reform of sugar regime Formerly a luxury product, its popularisation with consumers took centuries to achieve (Mintz 1985) Consumer confusion over imported cane and domestically produced sugar beet Sugar cane produced commercially and imported into UK since the fourteenth century Domestic beet production since First World War
Market regulation	Much less regulated than sugar Private regulation through retail-led product specifications and 'farm assurance' schemes	Subject to high levels of market regulation under CAP (production quotas, guaranteed minimum prices, import tariffs); first product to be subject to subsidies in Britain, last to be reformed under the CAP (Ward <i>et al.</i> 2008)

move along the chain. Such an approach was pioneered by Sidney Mintz (1985) and Arjun Appadurai (1986) with recent examples including Ian Cook's tracing of specific commodity geographies (Cook 2004), Cook and Crang's (1996) analysis of culinary culture, Cook and Harrison's (2003) work on 'cross-over' foods, and Freidberg's study of *French Beans and Food Scars* (2004). In contrast to these predominantly ethnographic studies, our research employed a life history approach (Perks and Thomson 2006), seeking to uncover the personal and corporate narratives through which people involved in the British food industry articulate their subjective understanding of the social and economic changes that have affected the industry within living memory. In the course of recording their life histories, we also asked more specific questions about the chicken and sugar industries, the ways products are marketed and regulated, and the relationships between producers and consumers. We recorded some 40 life history interviews, ranging in length between 2 and 14 hours, together with a series of shorter policy-orientated interviews, consumer focus groups and interviews.² In this paper, we draw on a fraction of this material, choosing extracts not for their typicality but for the specific insights they offer in terms of the moral economies of chicken and sugar. Several of our interviews were with senior executives at the British retailer Marks & Spencer. Our interviews coincided with the rebranding of Marks & Spencer's entire chicken range, henceforward known as Oakham chicken, on which we have reported elsewhere (Jackson *et al.* 2007). We also had very good access to senior managers at Tate & Lyle and British Sugar.

Moral geographies of chicken and sugar

As increasingly global industries, the production of chicken and sugar raise important issues about the ethics of 'caring at a distance' and of 'moral geographies' more generally (Smith 2000).³ In what follows we attempt to trace the way that different actors in the chicken and sugar chains articulate ethical demands and notions of moral responsibility. Drawing on our analysis of the life history interviews with strategically placed actors in these industries, we wish to argue that such claims are articulated through notions of time and space, examined here in terms of the ethics of *remembering and forgetting, connecting and disconnecting and visibility and invisibility*.

Remembering and forgetting

The history of sugar is characterised by a process of selective remembering and forgetting the significant differences between the beet and cane industries. Sugar beet is recalled in terms of a 'heroic' history, where British farmers claim to have protected domestic consumers over many decades from the dangers of naval blockades. By contrast, a process of amnesia seems to characterise the history of sugar cane, conveniently obscuring sugar's implications with slavery and Empire. An example of the sort of 'heroic' history that surrounds British sugar beet production is provided by East Anglian beet farmer, Henry Cross, though in this case he acknowledges the farmers' mixed motives for growing such a profitable crop:

I mean, we look back at it and say, 'Oh the farmer's fed us through the war and that'. But I think the farmers were doing it mainly 'cos it was profitable. I wouldn't claim any sort of fine motives for it. They knew that if you grow a good crop of beet or a good crop of potatoes, you made money and I honestly believe that's why they did it.⁴

The historical amnesia that surrounds the British sugar beet industry is illustrated by the following quotation from a senior informant at Tate & Lyle. Asked whether he experienced any sort of discomfort regarding sugar's legacy in terms of its associations with slavery and colonialism, he replied:

I don't think so. I mean there may have been in the minds of some of the countries who had been subject to the slave trade, particularly the Caribbean, and I think one could see it from time to time in the internal politics in those places. But it was never a major issue at all. And I don't think it drove their strategy in any way, their policies. It may have impacted on the way they handled their own domestic industries, but I don't think that was particularly to do with slavery.⁵

According to this prominent spokesperson for the British sugar industry, the legacy of slavery is a matter of 'internal politics', which affected the Caribbean's 'domestic industries' but which was not 'a major issue' for sugar importing countries like the UK.

The process of selective remembering and forgetting works rather differently in the case of chicken. Chicken is a paradigmatic case of agricultural intensification, its production having been transformed from a 'cottage industry' (where farmers kept a few chickens for egg production and where

chicken meat was consumed as a luxury on high-days and holidays) to a modern, highly intensive, centralised industry (Dixon 2002). Despite the very recent history of widespread chicken consumption, many consumers talk about chicken in nostalgic terms, yearning for chicken 'as it used to taste' before the onset of intensification.⁶ While this is part of a generalised backlash against the industrialisation of agriculture, which has also seen a rise in 'alternative' modes of production (Maye et al. 2007), the process takes a particular form in the case of chicken. It has also given rise to a commercial opportunity for high-street retailers, such as Marks & Spencer, to appropriate the language of 'alternative' (free range and organic) producers and to generate a premium for less intensive, slower-grown British chickens (as described by Jackson et al. 2007).

Marks & Spencer's poultry buyer, Catherine Lee, gives an historical explanation for contemporary British consumers' lack of interest in how chickens are reared, arguing that most people have lost any direct connection with agriculture:

We've moved so away from, so away from a rural environment . . . that the majority of the population live in a town. You know, they don't really see a live chicken on a day to day basis any more and therefore they've become squeamish about dealing with the consequences of that and they've become disassociated with it and you know, they all say Britain's a nation of animal lovers and things like that. Well maybe we are . . . but people really don't want to know and when they think about it, they're put off eating it and so they don't, you know, they don't really want to know about that.⁷

Many chicken farmers make a similar argument about contemporary consumers' alleged lack of knowledge about where their food comes from and how it should be cooked. For example, Audrey Kley, an intensive chicken grower, said that she was 'very worried about the housewife because she'll go and buy the cheapest that she can but she won't look or know where they're produced or where they come from', while Ray Moore, a hatchery manager, felt that 'To be quite honest, I don't think the town kids know where eggs and chicken come from':

Some people just think milk comes from a bottle . . . [and] that egg comes from a cardboard box but there's a chicken at the end . . . a live thing at the end.⁸

As well as invoking a nostalgic argument about the decline of consumer knowledge, both of these extracts prefigure the spatialised language of connection and disconnection that is explored in the next section.

Connecting and disconnecting

While the process of selective remembering and forgetting articulates moral issues across time, many of our interviewees expressed ethical concerns through geographical notions of connection and disconnection, often invoking a politics of scale, where what can be claimed or defended at one scale (the domestic or national, for example) may seem quite different when examined at a different (international or global) scale. Nottinghamshire sugar beet farmer Matt Twidale, for example, endorses the work of charities like Christian Aid in relation to natural disasters such as earthquakes and political conflicts such as civil wars. But he takes a different view when these same charities and NGOs appear to be attacking his livelihood: 'they're attacking my very living. I mean they're saying, why are you growing sugar beet in Europe?' Referring to a recent visit to his farm by a *Guardian* journalist, the farmer's arguments span a variety of scales from the field in which he is being interviewed to the 'Third World' whose economic position he is accused of undermining:

I mean she came to my farm one day to interview me. And she sat in the field of sugar, we sat in a field of sugar beet . . . and she said – and it was a damn good field of sugar beet – and she said, it was almost as if she'd rehearsed it, she said: 'Well Matt Twidale, we're here in your field of sugar beet and I want to ask you, why are you growing this crop, why are you growing this crop and losing money, when there are people in the Third World who can grow a lot more sugar cane than you, but they can't get the market and so therefore they can't make a good living out of it? Why are you growing it?' And there's me thinking, 'quite pleased with this crop of sugar beet, it's a very big crop.' It was one of the best crops I've ever grown and I was quite proud of it. So I was a bit deflated I must say.⁹

The farmer's indignation is almost tangible. Judged from his local perspective, sitting in a sugar beet field in Nottinghamshire, the crop is a testament to his high standards of husbandry. Judged from the international perspective of the journalist, he is implicated in the impoverishment of the Third World, because of legislation enacted at the European scale. Asked how he responded to the journalist's accusation, he replied:

Well, you're talking apples and oranges. You know, I have to live . . . [and] my wife has to shop . . . and we live in a sort of a highly regulated, highly paid society. The object of the Common Agricultural Policy – and maybe they've got it wrong, I don't know – but the

object was to lift European farmers out of peasantry, which they were in soon after the war, during the war, and give them the same standard of living as people in the towns and cities, that was the original object of it. And by the way, if you walk into a shop in Khartoum or Sydney, or Cali in Colombia and buy a bag of sugar, you're not paying much difference, or into England, you won't pay much difference wherever you buy your sugar, funnily enough.

In this extract, the farmer's argument traverses scales from England to the Third World, encompassing historical arguments about the original objectives of the CAP and including the effects of market regulation on sugar prices across the world. He seems to accept that different arguments apply at different scales, rejecting the journalist's simplistic logic that he is personally responsible for economic conditions in other parts of the world.

While some of our informants used historical arguments to justify the existence of agricultural subsidies, others used a spatial logic. Until it was reformed in December 2003, the EU's sugar regime served to protect European producers from external competition through a system of guaranteed prices and import tariffs. The British farmers we interviewed argued that they were simply working within the existing rules and that 'if we don't grow it the French will'.¹⁰ So, for example, Matt Twidale retorted angrily to those campaigning organisations who accused him of 'dumping' and 'scamming':

Some of the Oxfam people ... are using totally intemperate language. I mean 'scam' and you know ... 'daylight robbery' ... I mean, I'm not scamming anybody, but I have to live where I live and I have to ... abide by the rules that Tony Blair and Michael Howard and Ted Heath and all the politicians before them adopted for me. You know, we joined the EU and they all said it was a good thing to do this, and we didn't, I didn't push to join the EU ... in order to receive three times the world price of sugar. I just ... do the job well, hope the products will allow me to make a profit and plant again for next year. So when somebody who had never grown a sugar beet and never done anything other than political mouthing all his life starts saying that I'm a scammer and a dumper and a rotten so-and so, I ought to be put out of business, I take it pretty badly I'll tell you. You don't know how that grates, you really don't'.¹¹

Here again, Twidale defends his position by invoking a politics of scale ('I have to live where I live'), arguing that he is simply abiding by the rules that 'all the politicians ... adopted for me'. The consequences of these policies for other parts

of the world are regarded as completely beyond his control.

Sugar producers make little attempt to associate their product in the consumer's mind with geographically specific places or to reveal to consumers the complex industrial process of refining sugar. The situation is rather different with chicken. In this case, the ethical issues of connection and disconnection are more complex. Producers tread a fine line in terms of how much information consumers should be given about the production process and how much is left unstated. Because a premium is attached to British provenance and high standards of animal welfare, retailers like Marks & Spencer are keen to highlight where their chickens are grown, down to the level of the individual farm. Product labels are designed to make a connection with specific growers and marketing information seeks to emphasise the superior conditions of production of their brand compared to standard broiler chickens. But, as poultry buyer Catherine Lee emphasises, providing too much information (about growing or slaughtering conditions, for example) can make consumers squeamish. Improving the taste and quality of chicken, she argues, 'comes down to your knowledge of the agricultural system, but customers don't want to know that. Customers don't want to know that at all'.¹² In this case, the retailer wants customers to connect with the conditions of production sufficiently to understand the 'whole proposition of agriculture' on which the premium price of their particular product is based. But in doing so, she risks making them squeamish by revealing too much information.

The degree of connection between producers and consumers is also relevant to the debate about the relative merits of domestic or imported chicken. Imported chicken may be cheaper and of equal standard to British poultry in terms of hygiene and animal welfare. But, according to our interview and focus group evidence, British consumers still express a preference for British chicken. Significantly, though, consumer attitudes are very different for whole birds and portions (where provenance matters), compared to processed chicken in ready-meals such as chicken tikka masala (where consumers are more interested in intangible notions such as the 'authenticity' of the recipe than in where the chicken actually comes from). This may not be logical in ethical terms but, again, it points to the need for food producers to understand that they are

manufacturing meaning (negotiating the sometimes contradictory values that customers hold) as well as trying to create nutritious, popular and profitable food.

In the case of chicken, there is much less sense of ethical responsibility for 'distant strangers' than in the case of sugar. Indeed, poultry buyer Catherine Lee expresses a stronger sense of responsibility for low-income consumers 'at home' in Britain than she does for broiler chicken producers overseas whose wage rates her company may indirectly be affecting. A complex set of trade-offs is involved as the following extract about the relative cost of organic and broiler chicken demonstrates:

I can understand the principle of organic, but it's no good to a mum of five trying to feed a family, no good at all. Where I do feel a responsibility is, is to offer that person the best possible product I can at an affordable price for her. That's where I feel I have a responsibility ... the organic's lovely but we have to be prepared to buy it from a country where the labour rates are a lot lower, fuel prices are a lot lower, land prices are a lot lower, you know. And we don't like the idea of that, so the only alternative is to factory farm.¹³

The trade-offs alluded to here between the costs of land, labour and fuel, and between animal welfare standards and price, highlight the ethical complexities that are at play in contemporary chicken production.

Visibility and invisibility

If the discussion so far has given the impression that the moral economies of food are articulated through two separate dimensions of time and space, this section explores the simultaneous mobilisation of space and time through notions of visibility and invisibility.¹⁴ This is apparent, for example, in discussions of the relative visibility of sugar and chicken compared to many other foodstuffs. So, for example, even someone as heavily involved in the food business as cookery writer Jenny Linford claims that sugar is an 'invisible' food: 'It's taken for granted and we don't really think about ... how it's produced, how we consume it, its presence in our household'.¹⁵ Comparing chicken and sugar, she argues that chicken has a higher public profile because of animal welfare concerns and because of its potential impact on human health:

Well, I think it's interesting isn't it, I mean I think 'cos chicken is live. I mean chickens are live and then

they're killed and so people can ... And then, you know, there are diseases like salmonella, you know ... so there's a whole issue of meat being dangerous and killing you, whereas sugar doesn't have that. I mean you don't [eat] a teaspoon of sugar and die, even though there are other [health] issues to do with dental decay. And it's just interesting, it's an invisible food isn't it?

So, too, with sugar, its relative invisibility when used as a food additive and the difficulty of isolating its specific impact, especially when used as part of a balanced diet, enable dubious claims to be made in terms of its alleged health benefits. As one of our interviewees, a sugar beet fieldsman from East Anglia, cheerfully remarked:

Sugar is a marvellous commodity because, you know, we've always tried to replace it with sweeteners and things, but nobody's ever come up with the same taste. It's a preservative. It's what we call a bulking agent ... It's got a lot of added benefits other than just being a sweetener. I mean to say, there's nothing wrong with sugar, it's a matter of a balanced life.¹⁶

Sidney Mintz demonstrates that similar arguments about the 'astonishing versatility' of sugar have a long and complex history (1985, 206), arguing that the many uses of sugar (as preservative, food, spice, décor and medicine) have contributed to its 'near invulnerability to moral attack' (1985, 99). More recently, too, Gail Hollander (2003) has shown how US producers have responded to their critics by 're-naturalising' sugar via narratives of place, freshness and environmental sustainability.

The relative invisibility of chicken production also raises a variety of ethical concerns. A key issue is the sheer scale of the industry, whether one refers to intensively reared chickens grown in broiler sheds housing up to 20 000 birds or to the 'production line' approach to chicken slaughter:

It's a production line ... with chicken even more than anything else, because it works on volume, 9 000 an hour or whatever ... it's a production, but it's a production where something dies. And I suppose sometimes you do get a bit of a thought around that, but if I'm honest ... I don't really dwell on that. I don't really dwell on that at all, because I don't think you can. I mean if you did, then you'd probably struggle to do the job.¹⁷

In this extract, Marks & Spencer protein buyer Andrew Mackenzie admits that he might struggle to do his job if he had more constant reminders that chicken production is a process 'where something

dies'. But the scale of the industry and the fact that it takes place behind closed doors allow producers – and consumers – not to dwell on these potentially unpalatable aspects of the industry.

When asked to compare chickens with other protein species in terms of his personal sentiments towards them, Andrew Mackenzie returns to the issue of scale and to the fact that chickens are 'strange things' compared to lambs or beef cattle, for example, which are 'a bit more sensitive'. In this case, it is the scale of the industry that helps the interviewee to downplay the ethical issues involved in the mass production of chicken. Later in the same interview, he returns to the question of scale in terms of the cheapness and widespread availability of chicken, which, he feels, has affected its public perception:

The thing which I feel is, because chicken is so cheap and so available now, I think people's aspirations and expectations of chicken have lowered in the course of the last number of years ... And I think because it's eaten so regularly and we eat such a vast quantity of it, and you talked about it down to a unit or a commodity, I think that's a really good analogy because the other thing is that you know, chickens aren't the most appealing of things. I mean, you know, you don't think of them as you do a robin or a swan ... or a duck.

The interviewee concludes that chickens are hard to empathise with, given their volume and density within the modern broiler world, and that consumers might have a different attitude to chickens if they saw them 'scratching around on a farmyard':

People see a lamb outside become a sheep and they see a calf become a heifer or a steer and they are much more visually appealing ... You can see cows and sheep out in the field if you go to the countryside. You'll never see any chickens grown commercially, unless you happen to see a free range or organic [farm], but [broiler chickens are] often hidden away, so you don't see them ... So I think people can make that connection a bit more with four-legged things than they can with chicken.

A final example of the ethical issues involved in terms of visibility and invisibility is the question of provenance. Sugar manufacturers make few claims about the geographical origins of their product and consumers often cannot distinguish between imported cane and domestic beet sugar. Sugar is, as one observer suggested to us, 'sold like cement', piled high on supermarket shelves with little attempt at product differentiation, except for specialist sugars like demerara or muscovado.¹⁸ By

contrast, provenance is a key issue within the chicken industry and there is a premium on British produce compared to cheaper imports from places like Brazil or Thailand. In marketing Marks & Spencer's Oakham chicken, the Britishness of the brand was heavily promoted, down to the level of the individual farm, even though the name itself was something of a fiction:

The Oakham bit ... gives you the sort of idea of regional specificity without actually locating to a specific [place]. It's more about sort of countryside imagery and nice places. You know what I mean ... It's more about an image than it is a place and provenance ... There's a Britishness to it, because it sounds like – I don't know where it is – but it sounds like it's a place in Britain, you know, and there's that kind of provenance feel. A bit like Aberdeen Angus, 'cos that's effectively what we were looking for ... the Aberdeen Angus of the poultry world.¹⁹

There is an attempt here to establish a kind of fictional provenance, grounded spatially in ideas of regional specificity and temporally through a generalised nostalgia for 'countryside imagery and nice places'.²⁰

Geographies of responsibility

Having presented our empirical evidence, we wish to consider how some of the ethical and moral issues raised in this material might be resolved by reference to recent work on geographies of responsibility and the ethics of care by authors such as Doreen Massey and Iris Marion Young. Drawing on the work of feminist historians, Gatens and Lloyd (1999), Massey (2004) makes a geographical parallel with their argument about historical responsibility. Just as we may feel a sense of responsibility for previous events over which we had no direct influence, Massey argues, so may we be responsible for other places with which we are not directly connected. Gatens and Lloyd argue that the past inheres in the present and that 'we are responsible for the past not because of what we as individuals have done, but because of what we are' (1999, 81). So, too, Massey argues, are distant places implicated in our sense of the here and now:

If the identities of places are indeed the product of relations which spread beyond them (if we think space/place in terms of flows and (dis)connectivities rather than in terms only of territories), then what should be the political relationship to those wider geographies of connection? (2004, 11)

Massey's response is to outline a politics of connectivity, based on the mutual constitution of sometimes distant places – an argument that we apply to the politics of food and farming.

These ideas parallel those of Young (2003) about the ethics of sweatshop production where she distinguishes between notions of individualised blame (for which legal responsibility can be attached) and collective notions of political responsibility. While we are all tied into a global market system through our purchasing practices, Young argues, we are not individually to blame for the poor wages and conditions of sweatshop workers. We do, however, all share a responsibility for the collective outcome of our everyday acts as consumers. In other words, we are responsible for injustice by virtue of our structural connection to it (however indirectly and mediated that connection may be), even though we may not be individually to blame for it (2003, 40).

In the extracts above, we have seen how our interviewees advance moral arguments and ethical justifications in terms of different geographical scales and historical temporalities. For example, some processes are said to occur at a scale that is simply beyond the individual's ability to control (whether reflecting decisions taken in Brussels or practices whose histories stretch back across decades or even centuries). In other cases, what may seem just at one scale (to a farmer standing in a sugar beet field in eastern England, for example) may look very different when viewed at a global scale (by a newspaper journalist or human rights campaigner, for example). Many of the arguments outlined above approach scale as a series of successive layers, moving outwards from the individual through the nation to the globe. Thinking relationally about the *connections between scales* might offer an alternative to conventional thinking about the politics of space and place.²¹

The anthropologist Daniel Miller makes a similar case about the inherent contradictions that arise when ethical considerations are considered at different scales. In *The Dialectics of Shopping* (2001, 124–5) he highlights the mixed motives that underpin so-called ethical consumption, where altruistic attitudes towards the environment or distant strangers are mixed with a self-interested concern for the health and well-being of one's own family. On the basis of his ethnographic work in North London, Miller contrasts the prevalent discourse of ethical consumption with a general absence of ethical shopping

in practice. He seeks to resolve this contradiction not by accusing his respondents of hypocrisy, but by drawing a distinction between ethics and morals (2001, 133–4). According to Miller, consumers are more likely to act morally towards their immediate family members (via expressions of thrift, sacrifice and love, for example) than they are to demonstrate a wider ethic of care since this would involve subsuming the interests of their own household members to those of distant strangers, particularly with 'fair trade' goods sold at premium prices. There is, then, in Miller's view, a tension between the parochialism of morality versus the expression of a global ethics (2001, 137).

These issues can be addressed through the kind of relational thinking that Massey (2004) employs in her work on the geographies of responsibility. In the context of current debates about globalisation, for example, Massey refuses to see localities as the victim of global forces, abstractly conceived and always originating elsewhere. For such a view ends up pitting one locality against another and absolving people from any sense of moral responsibility for actions that take place at other scales. Massey argues strongly against such conceptions of space and place, suggesting that the global should be approached *through the local*, recognising the existence of many different globalisations, depending on the particular locality from which the global is viewed. Such a relational view of space might help us better understand the dilemma of a sugar beet farmer, like Henry Cross (quoted above), grappling with his sense of moral responsibility for distant strangers.

Massey's ideas are prefigured by the anthropologist Anna Tsing (2000), who argues that we should make scale the object of analysis rather than surrendering responsibility for actions that take place at all but the most local scale. Tsing begins by arguing that places are made through their connections with other places and that scales, like historical eras, are differentially and dialogically negotiated. In approaching scale as an object of analysis and to avoid being enthralled by globalisation, she urges us to pay close attention to projects of scale-making and to the ideologies of scale in terms of the claims that are made about locality, regionality and globality (2000, 347). Like Massey, she argues against the popular distinction between global forces and local places, suggesting that this obscures the ways that all processes of place-making are produced by forces that are simultaneously local and global (2000, 352).

These arguments are all applicable to our analysis of the moral economies of food and suggest valuable ways in which the general arguments of Polanyi and Sayer can be refined through closer attention to the spatial and temporal logic through which different moral and ethical claims are advanced. Polanyi (1944), it will be recalled, was concerned with the way that the 'old social tissue' had been destroyed by the rise of the market economy in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain. In contrast to the received wisdom about a self-regulating system of markets, he argued that 'man's economy [sic] . . . is submerged in his social relationships' (1944, 46), including notions of reciprocity and redistribution. As we argued in the Introduction, Polanyi's work on the political and moral constraints on the expression of unfettered economic rationality and unbridled self-interest inspired later interest in the 'social embeddedness' of economic life, including Sayer's (2000 2004) arguments about the mutual implication of political and moral economy. In this paper, we have attempted to show some specific examples of the way that food markets are socially embedded and how morality and markets interact through narratives of geographical scale and historical temporality. Our analysis supports the recent work of Morgan *et al.* (2006, 166) who identify the emergence of a 'new moral economy' of food, concerned with health, well-being, fair trade and development. Articulated around notions of trust and responsibility, they contrast this 'new moral economy' with another meta-regulatory trend concerned with the development of the 'neoliberal economy'. Our work shows specifically how these moral and economic issues are articulated by key players in the British food industry and how they are expressed through narrative constructions of memory, connection and visibility.

Conclusion

In this paper we have made a case for combining the political economy of agri-food products such as chicken and sugar with an understanding of their moral economy. We have shown how moral distinctions relating to food are expressed at a variety of scales and how very local concerns for the health and well-being of the family may run counter to larger-scale concerns for distant strangers. The discussion has shown how apparently rational decisions about the production and consumption of food are susceptible to ethical and moral concerns

because of the emotional investment that is made in decisions about 'feeding the family' (De Vault 1994) and how these 'local' concerns may conflict with our wider responsibilities for the environment or the needs of distant strangers. We have shown how morality and markets should not be seen as oppositional terms and how they can be brought together through notions of moral economy. In particular, we have sought to illuminate the moral economies of food by identifying three tropes through which these moral and ethical concerns are commonly expressed involving notions of remembering and forgetting, connecting and disconnecting, and visibility and invisibility.

To summarise, we have demonstrated striking differences in the way the histories of sugar are remembered (heroically in the case of sugar beet) and forgotten (in the case of sugar cane's troubled associations with slavery and Empire). We have argued that the moral economy of chicken is caught up in a generalised yearning for less intensive modes of production, coupled with a specific sense of nostalgia for 'chicken to taste like it used to'. While there is little attempt to connect producers and consumers within the sugar industry, this is directly encouraged by some chicken producers who seek to gain a premium by emphasising the superior quality of their production conditions without making consumers squeamish by providing too much information. We have also shown that both chicken and sugar are relatively 'invisible' commodities, though in different ways. Chickens are invisible in the modern broiler world because they are reared on such a large scale and in intensive broiler sheds that are rarely on view to the public. Sugar is invisible because it is so commonplace within households and because it is so often incorporated as an additive in processed food and drink.

Finally, we have presented a way of addressing some of the issues raised in our empirical material via a more relational view of geographical scale and temporal connection, drawing on Massey's arguments about the geographies of responsibility and Young's distinction between individual blame and collective responsibility. More generally, we have made a case for treating the moral economies of food alongside its political economy. Indeed, our argument about 'manufacturing meaning' suggests that a stark distinction between moral and political economy is untenable and that greater attention should be paid to the mutual constitution of morality and markets.

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Notes

- 1 The idea of 'food stories' has recently been employed by Smith and Jehlička (2007) in their analysis of post-socialist food politics in Poland and the Czech Republic. It is also the title we adopted for our educational website, hosted by The British Library (<http://www.bl.uk/learning/histcitizen/foodstories>).
- 2 All of the interviews were conducted by Polly Russell. They were transcribed in full and are deposited with the British Library as part of the National Sound Archive's *Food: From Source to Salespoint* collection. Details of the collection can be accessed via the Library's on-line catalogue (<http://www.bl.uk/cadensa>).
- 3 For an exposition of the ethics of 'caring at a distance', see Silk (1998). For an extension and critique of these ideas, see Barnett et al. (2005) and Lawson (2007).
- 4 Henry Cross, interviewed December 2003, C821/117. The code after the date of each interview indicates the British Library accession number through which the interviews can be accessed, subject to any restrictions imposed by the interviewee.
- 5 Anonymous Tate & Lyle interviewee, interviewed April 2004.
- 6 This phrase was repeated in several of our interviews. It is especially associated with the development of Marks & Spencer's Oakham chicken where, for example, agricultural technologist Mark Ranson (interviewed January 2004, C821/121) said: 'The overall aim is to provide customers with a chicken that tastes like ... it used to. [Customers] wanted chickens to taste like chickens used to taste years ago'. An anonymous chicken processor (interviewed July 2004) also said that the Oakham brand was designed to provide Marks & Spencer's customers with 'chicken the way it used to be'.
- 7 Catherine Lee, interviewed February–May 2004, C821/129. Later in the interview, she was even more outspoken about customers not wanting to know 'that that's a dead body sitting in front of them'.
- 8 Audrey Kley, interviewed September 2003, C821/109; Ray Moore, interviewed November–December 2003, C821/114.
- 9 Matt Twidale, interviewed March–April 2004, C821/134.
- 10 Henry Cross, op. cit.
- 11 Matt Twidale, op. cit.
- 12 Catherine Lee, op. cit.
- 13 Catherine Lee, op. cit.
- 14 'Invisibility' should be distinguished from 'concealment', where there is a deliberate intention to deceive. Cases of deliberate concealment were rarely discussed by our interviewees but have featured strongly in recent media accounts, such as those reported by Felicity Lawrence (2004) and Joanna Blythman (2006).
- 15 Jenny Linford, interviewed December 2005, C821/31.
- 16 Clive Casburn, interviewed March 2004, C821/138.
- 17 Andrew Mackenzie, interviewed February 2004, C821/135. The conditions associated with intensive chicken production have been rendered more visible recently through popular television programmes such as *Hugh's Chicken Run* (Channel 4, January 2008) and *Jamie's Fowl Dinners* (Channel 4, January 2008), hosted respectively by celebrity chefs Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall and Jamie Oliver.
- 18 Thanks to Elizabeth Dowler for this telling observation.
- 19 Catherine Lee, op. cit.
- 20 Though not discussed in detail here, questions of visibility are also relevant to consumer assessments of food quality. For example, Becker (2000) distinguishes between *search quality* (based on intrinsic cues such as the colour, marbling and leanness of meat, and extrinsic cues such as branding, provenance and price); *experience quality* (based on flavour, tenderness, juiciness etc.); and *credence quality* (as signalled by quality assurance labels, health and safety information etc.).
- 21 Relational thinking emphasises relations rather than substances, 'bonds' (or connections) rather than 'essences', fluidity rather than fixity, and networks (or relations) rather than structures. For an introduction to relational thinking in post-structuralist geography, see Murdoch (2005) and for the development of a relational ethics that encompasses both human and non-human actors, see Whatmore (1997).

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