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**The traditional food market and place:  
new insights into fresh food provisioning in England**

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## **The traditional food market and place: new insights into fresh food provisioning in England.**

### **Abstract**

This article adds to on-going debates about food provisioning in England and the relative positioning of supermarkets vis-à-vis other sources of fresh food. Arguing that traditional food markets have been neglected in the agri-food literature, the paper investigates the suggestion that they are at ‘a critical juncture’, with many in decline and others being (re-)gentrified for a wealthier type of customer. Theoretically, the article argues that the ‘internal’ and ‘external’ spaces and places of traditional food markets are tightly interwoven. It draws on database analysis and detailed findings from interviews with market managers, traders and shoppers conducted on markets in contrasting regions of England in the cities of Newcastle and Cambridge. The findings provide new insights by examining the connective spaces and places that link market actors and consumers as fresh food moves across the geographical regions and through the marketplace. Taking a relational view, the paper challenges the suggestion that traditional food markets are at ‘a critical juncture’, arguing that there are unique points of difference on how the traditional food market adapts to rapid retail change, according to its geography, history and the spatial and temporal tensions between traditional and modernized fresh food provisioning systems, and suggests the need for further in-depth research.

**Key words:** *traditional food markets, England, fresh food provisioning systems, supermarkets, internal dynamics and external pressures, place.*

### **Introduction**

This article adds to on-going debates about fresh food provisioning in England and the relative positioning of supermarkets vis-à-vis other sources of fresh food. Traditional food markets (also referred to as public, retail or street markets) have been neglected, and even ignored, in much of the agri-food literature, which tends to focus on retail restructuring and modernized supermarket systems (see for e.g. Marsden 2000; Reardon and Hopkins 2006; Freidberg 2007) and ‘alternative’ systems and local food networks (see for e.g. Goodman and DuPuis 2002; Ilbery and Maye 2005; Harris 2010; Goodman *et al.* 2012), including farmers’ markets (notably Kirwan 2004, 2006).

The role of traditional markets as conduits for fresh food provisioning is much under-researched beyond a general commentary which suggests that rapid transformation in the food retail supply system has tended to marginalize them. Reardon and Rimmer (2012) use the term 'large scale' as synonymous with 'modern' as they chart the rise of supermarket shopping, and reference to *traditional* fresh food markets in this article means fresh food sourced, distributed and retailed within food market systems that predate, but continue to operate alongside, 'modernized' supermarket systems (see also Smith 2012a). In England, traditional food markets are thought of as places that provide *affordable* fresh food and are thus associated with low-income shoppers (Watson and Studdert 2006). More recently, however, some are being 're-invented' as places for buying quality food and attracting more wealthy shoppers (Coles and Crang 2011). This has led Gonzalez and Waley (2012) to suggest that traditional markets are at a 'critical juncture', poised between gentrification and maintaining their traditional customer-base (see also Vicdan and Firat 2013).

Exploring the different ways in which traditional food markets have been affected by, and have adapted to, changes in fresh food provisioning, the article examines the connective spaces and places that link market actors and consumers as fresh food moves across the geographical regions and through the marketplace. It argues that how traditional food markets adapt to change is dependent on their geography, history and a regional approach to food and farming and, within each city, on the effects of retail restructuring and the attendant spatial and temporal tensions between traditional and modernized fresh food provisioning systems. Through detailed case study analysis, the paper develops an approach to traditional market dynamics that accounts for how micro-level activities of traditional food market exchange interact with food

systems, power structures and consumption practices that transform each other over time and space at the macro-level. Understanding the interplay between these ‘internal dynamics’ and ‘external pressures’ is therefore crucial and the next section of the paper sets this conceptualisation out in more detail. The research methodology is then outlined before a detailed empirical analysis of two contrasting traditional food markets (Cambridge and Newcastle) is provided.

### **Theorizing the traditional food market and place**

The adopted theorization develops a place-sensitive view of the traditional food market, highlighting how space and place are co-constitutive, by using an internal/external framing device. This draws on Polanyi’s (1944, 1957) recognition that market and society mutually adjust to each other over time and place, and examines how what frames and takes place in the market co-evolve (Harvey and Metcalfe 2010). Framing is used to develop a relational view of these internal/external dynamics and takes account of how the complex inter-weaving of *external* commercial pressures and cultures of the surrounding food retail landscape and *internal* dynamics of fresh food trading on the traditional market are place-specific and contingent. External commercial pressures and cultures include the effects of rapid retail restructuring in city centres and the changing rhythms of urban spaces and their effects on people using those spaces (Lefebvre 2004). It is also important to consider how people use these spaces to try to resist the power structures that contain them (de Certeau 1984; de Certeau *et al.* 1998) and to more fully understand why people choose to resist the increasing dominance of the supermarket by shopping on the traditional food market for fresh produce; this may be related, for example, to family habits, anti-supermarket feelings, price, accessibility and / or a range of other factors.

However, external commercial pressures and cultures interact in different ways with the internal dynamics of fresh food trading on each individual market site. As Berndt and Boeckler (2009, 536) note, '(m)arkets do not simply fall out of thin air, but are continually produced and constructed socially with the help of actors who are interlinked in dense and extensive webs of social relations'. Although the traditional food market is an institutional space governed by formal (and informal) rules, it is also socially constructed and constantly changing as a result of on-going cultural and economic processes (Bestor 2004). Thus socio-spatial demographics outside the market frame result in a different use of space within the market frame. How the market is understood in its contemporary context is the result of historical shifts and continuities, cultural legacies and processes of adaptation. Such an understanding is also bound up with complex connections and processes of differentiation in food provisioning that are simultaneously material, political and cultural (Narotzky 2005).

Working from the conceptual premise that market and place are both spatially varied and change as a result of on-going cultural and economic processes and practices, the rest of the article examines how spatial distribution patterns of food markets reflect their geographical relationship with place, including how historical shifts and cultural legacies are mutually implicated. It discusses how market and place are intertwined in a relationship that has adapted to retail restructuring and changes in fresh food provisioning over time, contextualised by the commercial pressures and cultures of the surrounding food retail landscape (Freidberg 2004). The conceptual framework moves beyond common dynamics that others have drawn upon to suggest that markets are at a 'critical juncture', and attempts to examine how these relational

effects of place and space have different outcomes according to the location of the traditional food market.

### **Data and Methods**

In order to investigate how traditional food markets have adapted to changes in fresh food provisioning, the methodology adopted a two-stage process. First, secondary data on traditional food markets in the UK, and their links with wholesale markets and farmers' markets, were analysed to demonstrate how the spatial distribution of food markets reflects their geographical relationship with place. Secondly, detailed case study research was conducted at the local level on two contrasting traditional food markets in England. The first stage identified 2,105 food markets of all types operating in the UK: 1,124 traditional food markets (60% run by the public sector), 26 wholesale markets, 605 farmers' markets and 350 country markets. This showed a dominance of *outdoor* markets, including traditional food markets (42%) and farmers' markets (23%), although sizeable numbers from every category continued to operate as *indoor* markets (35% of total markets). Findings on the geographical distribution of markets are not developed in this article (but see Smith 2012b).

The secondary analysis helped to inform the selection of two case study markets which shared some common features but also provided an opportunity to investigate difference and the study's interest in internal/external relations. The final selection criteria were: i) one *outdoor* and one *indoor* traditional food market, at least one of which was operated by a local authority; ii) one traditional market in a *Northern* city (where most large indoor markets operate) and one in an *agricultural* area to provide an urban-rural contrast; iii) both markets to operate in the city centre on at least 3 days



per week; and iv.) a farmers' market was held on either the same or an adjoining site to help explore food provisioning from 'alternative' sources. The process led to the selection of the *Grainger Market*, Newcastle in the north-east region and *Cambridge market* in the eastern region for detailed case study research.

Semi-structured interviews took place between October 2009 and March 2010 on the markets in Newcastle and Cambridge; the breakdowns are shown in Table I. Interviews were arranged in advance with market managers/ officers and took place on each market. The amount of fresh food on sale was limited on both markets and it was possible to approach the majority of stall-holders trading at the time of the survey to ask for an interview. Traders who agreed to be interviewed represented those selling all types of fresh food on each market (i.e. fruit and vegetables, meat and fish). No attempt was made to secure a formal quota of shoppers on the markets, although care was taken that those approached for interview represented a mix of gender, age and ethnicity, with varied socio-economic profiles (professionals, students, young families, retired people, etc.).

Table I: Breakdown of interviews on markets in Newcastle and Cambridge

	<b>Newcastle</b>	<b>Cambridge</b>
Market managers/officers	2	1
Market traders (fresh food)	7	4
Market shoppers	24	18
Farmers' market operators	1	1
Farmers' market shoppers	4	3

The interview schedules were constructed to explore the internal/external relations evident on each market. This included topics related to who was trading and shopping on each market, the fresh food choice, and how each market interacted with other food markets and supermarket retailers in the area. Interviewees also had the chance to talk about their own experiences and perspectives on the market, with particular reference to why they chose to buy fresh food here rather than from other retail outlets.

### *The case study markets*

The traditional food markets selected in Newcastle and Cambridge provided good examples of how historical shifts and cultural legacies were mutually implicated in each market's geographical relationship with place. At the regional level, small-scale farming practices in the north-east, with a tradition of cattle and sheep farming and a traditional food market that began as a meat market in Newcastle, contrasted with the large-scale crop and vegetable production of the agricultural eastern region and an outdoor market in Cambridge where fresh vegetables and fruit dominated the fresh food on offer.

Although the impacts of the economic downturn were felt more keenly in Newcastle as a city in industrial decline (whereas Cambridge remained a city with an expanding economy), both city centre markets had suffered from the impacts of surrounding rapid retail re-development. This had resulted in fierce competition from supermarkets, fast food outlets, coffee shops and cafes and a range of niche food shops etc. and the number of butchers on the Grainger Market in Newcastle had dropped from 30 in the 1980s to nine in 2010. Likewise in Cambridge, the number of

fruit and vegetable traders had declined from 20 in the 1970s to six in 2010. In addition, Newcastle's farmers' market was established by the city council in August 2001 and operated on the first Friday of each month on a nearby square and Cambridge's farmers' market, also operated by the city council, was established twelve years ago and runs on the traditional market site each Sunday.

### **Connective places: examining internal and external market relations**

Against this contextual background, the case study research examined how the *internal* dynamics of fresh food provisioning within the market place were tightly inter-woven with the *external* pressures and cultures of retail restructuring and changing patterns of fresh food consumption, through interviews conducted with market managers/operators, traders and shoppers.

#### *Sourcing fresh food*

Comments from traditional food market traders reflected how place and culture remained entwined on each market as global sourcing and cultural and ethnically bound habits and tastes mingled with local demand for fresh food (Edensor and Kothari 2006; Massey 2007). Traditional food market traders had adapted their sourcing strategies over time to meet changing socio-demographics and new requirements from market shoppers. For example, most fruit and vegetable traders now offered a wide choice of imported produce. On the market in Cambridge, one trader felt that they had followed the supermarket trends; produce regarded as 'exotic' 10 or 15 years ago, like sweet potatoes and fennel, were now 'run of the mill'. In Newcastle, sourcing had also adapted to meet the demands of 'cosmopolitan localism' (Morgan and Sonnino 2010). Another trader said, 'you get all that type of coriander,

chilli, ginger, pak-choi – because people are asking for it’, and a fishmonger explained how he sourced fish for particular ethnic groups, particularly the Chinese community. However, some fruit and vegetable traders on Cambridge market also detected a new interest in local produce. One felt that the Cambridge market survived well because it had similarities with farmers’ markets. He said:

*‘I’m capturing people that were brought up on farmers’ markets and they are just interested. They tend to be middle class, young families – probably academic or people working in the hospital – the people who would go to a farmers’ market or an organic shop come here as well’.*

Rhythms imposed a ‘natural’ temporal order on market activities in both cities but these rhythms were in constant motion as each market adjusted and adapted to retail restructuring and changing shopping habits. Traders commented on these changing rhythms of marketing activity. For example, a typical comment made by a Cambridge trader was:

*‘the market starts a lot later. Twenty years ago there were queues at 08.00 – now we may not serve anyone until 10.00. Shopping doesn’t get going until 11.30 when the pensioners can get their free bus pass and finishes around 15.00’.*

The rhythm of the seasons also affected market trade and impacted traders in different ways depending on what they sold. For example, the butcher on Cambridge market said that he was, ‘busy at Christmas, quiet early January, busy early summer, dead during the summer holidays, picks up in September’. Yet, for the fishmonger in Newcastle, ‘September is the worst month because all the kids go back to school and

older people take their holidays then'. For traders on the outdoor market in Cambridge the weather also affected sales. One commented that 'on a sunny day you sell a lot of strawberries and on a cold day you are not going to sell any'.

These examples of how fresh food is sourced and traded demonstrate evidence of relational contingency between, for example, types of food sold, different seasonal effects and different trading experiences on outdoor and indoor markets; this is considered further in the next sub-section by looking at how people shopped for fresh food in each location.

#### *Shopping for fresh food*

Just as Kirwan (2004) found on farmers' markets, comparisons with supermarket shopping 'as an arbiter of quality', ran through the narrative with both shoppers and traders. For example, a trader selling local food in the Grainger Market said:

*'trying to persuade people that don't shop on markets that the produce is just as good and probably better than what you get in supermarkets [is very difficult...]people just trust the big brands and don't quite understand what they don't know'.*

This was brought to life by a professional male in his 60s shopping on Cambridge market, when he talked about how he had come to appreciate the qualities of the fresh food on sale on the market:

*'Many years ago I had an experience when I wanted to buy a piece of pork from Sainsbury's but I couldn't find what I wanted. So I went to the butcher here for the first time – it didn't look very good but I bought it – I had no*

*choice – but then I discovered to my great surprise and joy it was infinitely better than what I had previously bought’.*

And an elderly female shopper in Newcastle, who had ‘always’ shopped on markets, said:

*‘I think you always get good quality in the market, different from the supermarket, I think. I would say price-wise it’s good value. I prefer the quality to supermarkets and corner shops’.*

Interestingly, all shoppers interviewed on the farmers’ market in Newcastle also shopped on the Grainger Market and, in this instance no distinctions were made between fresh produce on the traditional market and farmers’ market. For example, one male shopper in his 50s said:

*‘it just depends where I am really – what I look for is good quality at a reasonable price and I can find this in both places[...] I never buy meat in supermarkets and I never buy vegetables in supermarkets because they are horrendously expensive and they are not as matured as the stuff here’*

Other traditional market shoppers, especially young students, also made comparisons with fresh produce on sale in supermarkets, although for them the price difference was critical. In Newcastle, one said, ‘we all come here to shop because it’s a lot cheaper - and the service is nice as well’. In contrast, others admitted that they did not look at prices and were more concerned with quality, how the food tasted and a desire to support local people. One young working male in Newcastle said:

*'I don't really think about how much I spend on the market in a week. I'm not particularly good at budgeting. I just buy what I need from particular people who sell local stuff. I shop in the supermarket as infrequently as possible'.*

Another young male shopper in Newcastle also expressed motivations that were bound up with ideals and trust when he said:

*'I like buying things more from real people rather than big supermarket shelves. Maybe its kind of an ideal going and interacting with people behind the stalls – and the food is usually better quality than you would find in the supermarkets'.*

However, some traders felt that 'price sells everything' and many expressed frustration with how external commercial pressures threatened their livelihoods. For most market traders this was associated with low supermarket pricing; however, one Newcastle butcher, a man in his 40s, expressed frustration with the competition from the nearby farmers' market. He appeared to discount any differences in quality. For him, it was all about price:

*'A lot of my customers go and have a look and they come back. They don't buy anything – they just say, 'bloody expensive there'. Our sausages are £2 a pound; theirs are £4.50 /£5 a pound. If they want to spend twice the money and get the same product, well I suppose they can'.*

In contrast, a fruit and vegetable trader, of a similar age, in Cambridge had a different perspective that could have been related to the more wealthy socio-demographics of

those shopping on this market. He did not think that people even looked at the prices and said:

*'I think if you asked them how much they paid three days ago for a certain item they probably wouldn't remember. There's a few basic items that people do know the price of like bread, milk, eggs and maybe a banana because of their supermarket shopping, but many of the items they don't know the price of and it does fluctuate here on the market. It does go up and down with supply and demand'.*

The findings reveal a 'sliding scale' of moral and monetised values (Appadurai 1996) as fresh food takes on cultural form. Comments made by traders and shoppers identify 'points' where cultural meaning and economic value interact and transform how the food is valued (Hinde and Dixon 2007). They also reflect how notions of 'good value' are informed by the 'external' experience of shopping in the supermarket. However, in the more 'cash-strapped' city of Newcastle, there was an important distinction between 'cheap food' and food that was 'good value'. One Newcastle trader, a woman in her 30s selling local food, summed this up well when she said:

*'I think that I'm reluctant to say that things are cheaper because cheap kind of implies cheap and nasty and it's not. I think that you get better value but I don't think that means the same thing. If you get cheap meat at the supermarket, then it's crap, but here I think you get better value. It's like getting away from the idea that it's cheap and nasty, which I think is the problem. So, I would say, that it's better value, but not necessarily cheaper'*



## **Discussion**

The case study findings begin to show how the place of each traditional food market is unique and geography is part of each market's particular identity; location matters, including how the contemporary marketplace is understood through the commercial pressures and cultures of the surrounding food retail landscape. There was evidence that the Grainger Market in Newcastle, a city affected by economic decline, was struggling to adjust to fierce competition and change in the surrounding food retailing environment. By contrast, Cambridge market, located in a city with an expanding economy, appeared to be adapting and innovating more successfully to meet changing retailing and consumption practices, including increasing demand for more local produce in this agricultural region. These observations suggest that what frames the market and what takes place within the marketplace co-evolves.

There were also groups of shoppers who felt that the market offered something more than 'doing the shopping'. Comments about 'good value' often tied price and quality together to the detriment of packaged produce available in the supermarket that was often considered 'tired and tasteless'. For some younger shoppers, this was bound up with reaffirming their local identity and, for others, it was about buying fresh food from 'real people rather than big supermarket shelves' and supporting local growers and producers. 'Good value' rather than 'cheap' was an important distinction in how fresh food is transformed into the traditional 'market product' and notions of 'good value' were formed through the parallel experience of shopping in the supermarket and, to a lesser extent, on the farmers' market (see also, de la Pradelle 2006).

The relational framework helps to reveal how common factors are experienced differently in Newcastle and Cambridge. The specific external and internal spaces that support traditional food market exchange are affected by constant, and ever-changing, interaction between wider socio-demographic and economic processes and localised retail restructuring and changing fresh food shopping and consumption habits. Sympathetic to de Certeau's 'tactical' view of culture as a lens to examine how market actors interact in the market space and how everyday practices of fresh food market exchange are used 'to open up little spaces where they can assert themselves' (Thrift 2003, 103 from Everts and Jackson 2009), the conceptualisation also helps to illuminate more subtle changes about how fresh food is provisioned through the connective spaces and places that link traders and shoppers in the marketplace as they 'resist' the power of the supermarket.

### **Conclusions**

As Crewe (2003, 352) observes, '(a) number of different models of markets and exchange seem to be emerging which, in different ways, might help to develop our theorisation of the connections between commodities, consumers and their spatial and temporal worlds'. This suggests the need to move beyond framing 'the market' as a singular institutionalised entity or space and the need to think of markets as 'bundles of practices and material arrangements always in the making' (Berndt and Boeckler 2011, 565). Gonzalez and Waley's (2012) suggestion that traditional food markets are at a 'critical juncture' is disputed because there is no generic change across all traditional food markets. In keeping with Crewe (2003) and Berndt and Boeckler (2011), the evolution and future trajectory of traditional food markets needs to be framed in more spatially contingent terms, with cultural and economic practices that

order the external pressures of retail restructuring interwoven with the everyday internal dynamics of market exchange.

Holloway and Kneafsey (2000) underline how political and social terrains influence the way in which food networks are constructed, and the findings of this study provide new insights into the traditional food retail sector, highlighting how these food markets are intimately linked with the regions and cities where they are located and how different geographies, histories and approaches to food and farming have moulded the relationship between market and fresh food over time. It is worth noting that as the 'modernization' of food systems becomes a global phenomenon, traditional food systems and their markets are coming under threat in countries in the Global South (Reardon and Rimmer 2012; Shields 2013). This suggests there is a need for further research on traditional food provisioning systems and their markets. This research would build on the methodological strengths of the relational approach and the cultural economy framework employed here, including more detailed analysis of trader and shopper perspectives, and could lead to greater understanding of the spatial and temporal tensions between traditional and modernized fresh food provisioning systems at the macro-scale and bring more insight into its implications for future food system development.

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