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The urban creative-food economy: producing food for the urban elite or social inclusion opportunity?

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Abstract. The food industry has always been a major generator of economic activity in the Greater Toronto Area. However, recently the innovative and creative elements of the industry have changed. Since the mid-1990s, the fastest growing segment within the industry has been small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The specialty, ethnic, and organic SMEs (hereinafter referred to as the 'creative-food' industry) appear to be particularly innovative as they respond to consumer demand for local, fresh, ethnic, and fusion cuisine. On the basis of sixty-five interviews with food producers, processors, restaurateurs, food media, non-government organizations, government, and private sector agencies, it is suggested that this creative-food sector is thriving despite existing public policies that bias toward large-scale, industrialized agri-food firms in the region. As such, a disconnect currently exists between, on the one hand, the traditional agrifood paradigm that the government regulatory environment is promoting and, on the other hand, the locally consumer-driven food cluster that is emerging. Public policies of multiculturalism and education have done more to facilitate the unprecedented growth of this creative subcomponent of the food sector than have explicit public food-policy initiatives. However, there is still room for policy initiatives that advance the development of this dynamic sector, especially in the area of supportive infrastructure, access to health-based ethnically appropriate food, food education, and fair labour standards. Contrary to a widely held view, the creative-food industry is not just about promoting exclusive foods for the pleasure of urban elite. Rather, it offers an opportunity for a more socially inclusive and sustainable urban development model. The findings also have implications for multilevel governance in cluster formation and policy, future research on food, as well as for theories on innovation, urban creativity, and governance.

1 Introduction

The emerging literature on urban creativity and cultural industries makes it clear that the city is now a site of dynamic economic creativity and experimentation (Florida, 2002; Gertler, 2001; Scott, 2000). Similarly, new research in urban political geography makes a compelling case for the urban as the site for new political possibilities that present an alternative to "actually existing neoliberalism" (Brenner and Theodore, 2002, page 349; see also Christopherson, 1994; Kipfer and Keil, 2002; Smith, 2001). The two bodies of literature sometimes meet on broad theoretical ground. However, the conceptual links between these two bodies of literature could be more explicit, especially if we are to advance research in urban economy and governance. One reason why the conceptual associations between these two areas have not been developed is that a general suspicion still exists in the critical urban political geography community that what scholars in the sometimes more narrowly defined 'urban creativity' camp 'do' is largely uncritical, empirically based research that is conducted at the expense of more fundamental questions concerning the type of society we want (for example, one that may be more socially inclusive). On the other hand, economic geographers studying urban creative industries have sometimes taken the position that urban political theories are at a standstill, mainly because those who engage in this type of theorizing have not conducted enough empirical research on urban economic change. Sometimes these criticisms stem from a deeper concern within the broader human geography literature at the retreat within the discipline from a more explicitly political economy

approach to a more postmodern cultural-orientation approach (Hudson, 2004; Lovering, 1999). However, others direct their criticisms more toward the lack of empirical research now available on urban economic change which, they argue, hampers geographers' ability to make effective policy and conceptual contributions to the urban economic development literature (Glasmeier, 1998; Markusen, 1999; 2001). Our purpose here is not to get into a broader discussion regarding the state of the economic subdiscipline. (For recent discussions, see Amin and Thrift, 2000; Barnes 2001; Clark et al, 2000; Hudson, 2004; Peck, 2005; Scott, 2004; Sheppard et al 2003.) Rather, our purpose is to suggest ways in which we can effectively bring a more critical edge to more recent research on urban creativity and cultural industries and, at the same time, bring a more robust empirical component to some of the latest theoretical thinking regarding spaces of 'actually existing neoliberalism' (Brenner and Theodore, 2002).

We suggest that the conceptual associations between these two literatures could be further developed by exploring insights from newer research in the international political economy literature on 'varieties of capitalism' (Hall and Soskice, 2001). This literature, with its roots in the French Regulation School of the 1980s and 1990s (Boyer and Saillard, 2002; Jessop, 1990; Peck, 2000; Tickell and Peck, 1995), starts from the position that firms must be brought back into the centre of the analysis of economic and political change. This process was started with the well-known work of Piore and Sabel (1984) on social systems of innovative production (see also Boyer, 1999; Dosi, 1988; Edquist, 1997; Hollingsworth et al, 1994; Nelson, 1993). However this body of work has been criticized for sometimes overstating what governments can accomplish when economic adjustments are firm led. Hall and Soskice (2001) argue for a firm-centered political economy that sees companies as crucial actors in new forms of economic development (echoing, of course, classic works in economic geography on the importance of the firm in critical regional studies: see, for example, Markusen, 1994; Schoenberger, 1997). The broader institutional and social–political context is still a necessary component of this framework, yet firms must be the centre of the analysis.

In this paper, we suggest that this approach can be applied to the study of firm-led change in the city, as the city is the space, place, and scale where interesting new forms of extrafirm relationships are emerging. Of course, we recognize that some of the most important institutional structures (such as labour-market regulation, education, and training) still depend on regulatory regimes that are the preserve of the nation-state. However, we argue that urban-scale firm-led research is an approach that can make an important contribution to current debates over what kind of society we want to live in. The rise of the urban creative-food economy is one example of urban-scale firm-led economic activity.

The urban creative-food economy,—specifically, quality-based local, ethnic, or organic products—is often characterized in the critical political geography literature as evidence of urban elitism, exploitative labour practice, or as a product that has already been colonized by the agri-industrial food chain (Buck et al, 1997; Guthman, 2003). The organic-food industry, in particular, has been criticized for its elitism. Given that organic food is more expensive than its conventional counterparts, it is not surprising that the most common belief is that only the very rich or radically health conscious can afford it (Lockie et al, 2001). The perceived health and safety attributes of organic foods are a major motivating factor in its market growth; however, high-income earners are also attracted to the high status of its current niche market (Lockie et al, 2001, page 36). Guthman (2003) has also taken a fairly critical position on the rise of the organic industry in California, arguing that the organic movement has

already been 'conventionalized' and co-opted by the large corporate agricultural elite in that state. Exploitive labour practices through the use of migrant, low-wage labour are regularly used in preharvest and postharvest organic processing, and processing by definition underscores how agribusiness capital is penetrating organic agriculture (Buck et al, 1997, page 15).

Linked closely with this last point are questions related to the so-called 'quality' turn in what is being defined as alternative agrofood networks (AAFNs) (Goodman, 2002; 2004; Harvey et al, 2004; Jarosz, 2004; Marsden and Arce, 1993; 1995; Whatmore et al, 2003). The long-term effects of the shift to 'quality' foods are not well understood. The research to date points to the need to understand better the role of the consumer in alternative food processes, the concentration of power in the hands of a few retailers, and the 'reification' of the local scale. Ultimately we need to probe these complex relationships more thoroughly to decipher who stands to gain from alternative food production systems (Goodman, 2004). In this paper we contend that it is premature to conclude that the industrial food system has colonized the alternative or that the alternative food system has become solely the new diet of the privileged class. Not enough research has been conducted on quality-based specialty food systems (including organic, but also local, quality, traceable, ethnic/fusion foods) to apply these conclusions across the board. Goodman (2004), in a review of the impact of AAFNs, advocates that these production systems still offer new opportunities for producers and, by extension, for rural development.

Furthermore, we would argue that these systems offer potential for new forms of urban development. Most of the research to date has examined these networks from a rural development perspective (Goodman, 1999; Ilbery and Kneafsey, 2000; Marsden, 2004; Michelsen, 2001). Yet there is little research on the rise of these alternative systems in urban centres—specifically, the links in the food chain among producers–processors–distributors/retailers and a multiethnic consumer base. Although there is an extensive literature on the consumption of food and taste in general (Bell and Valentine, 1997; Warde, 1997), we know little, for example, about firm agency and the role that extrafirm relationships play in the emergence of the specialty industry in large metropolitan regions with transforming economies and societies. We know virtually nothing about how the 'urban' (an important but hitherto underemphasized type of 'extrafirm' relationship) fosters innovation within this industry and, by extension, political innovations toward more socially inclusive economic development (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Peck and Tickell, 2002).

We start from the position that there is something fundamentally 'new' and 'different' about the emerging urban creative-food economy in North American cities. We suggest that these new (and often very creative) developments have the potential to offer a viable alternative to the current forms of neoliberal urban economic development that now dominate the North American landscape. Contrary to a widely held view, new developments within the urban food economy are not just about addressing the cultural consumption habits of an urban bourgeois: rather, they offer a potential for a more socially inclusive urban development model. To develop this argument, we have divided our paper into several parts. First, we discuss what the current literature has to say on what is specifically new and innovative about alternative food networks. Second, we report on our findings from an empirically based study of innovation within the specialty, ethnic, organic, and local food system in Greater Toronto. Third, we explore the implications of our research for multilevel governance in cluster formation and policy, new research agendas on food, and for our theories on innovation and urban governance.

2 What is 'new' about the urban food economy?

Just as the city is a contradictory and ambivalent space, so too is the urban food economy (consisting of food producers, processors, distributors, retailers, restaurants, chefs, consumers, businesses, and government and nongovernmental organizations). On the one hand, the urban food economy is the space where demand is most intense for 'value-added' food products from the agro-industrial system. Big food companies, like Kellogg's, Nestlé, and Safeway, for example, boast that consumers are now willing to pay a premium for 'value-added' products such as processed foods and precooked meals (Laidlaw, 2003; Schlosser, 2002; Wrigley, 1998).

On the other hand, the city is the space, place, and scale where demand is also greatest for alternative food products. Some of these products contain elements of the agro-industrial food chain. Others, however, are part of something fundamentally different. It is the desire to figure out this 'difference' that has motivated us.

'Alternative', 'specialty', 'quality' and 'local' are adjectives used to describe an array of food-supply networks of specific ethnic, organic, fair-trade, or artisanal products. These products may be sourced from anywhere and their suppliers may be different, but what they have in common is their appeal to quality-seeking consumers of food. Quality is, of course, a loaded term that means something different to everyone. For the quality-seeking consumer of a specific ethnic product, for example, quality may be defined as the ability to find an 'authentic' product from their homeland that cannot be purchased at a mainstream food retailer. For another consumer it may be about consumer products grown locally; for another it may be about buying products free from pesticides or herbicides, regardless of the source. However, one could argue that the common thread among these consumers is that they are looking for something different from what is available from more mainstream producers or retailers. In many cases, a new 'trust' has emerged between themselves and the producer or even retailer. According to Whatmore et al (2003, page 389) (see also Morgan and Murdoch, 2000), not only do these alternative food networks share a new trust between producer and consumer, but they also "redistribute value through the network *against the logic of bulk commodity production*" (emphasis added). They go on to note that these alternative food networks are nourishing "new market, state, and civic practices and visions". In this context, Europe is seen to be miles ahead of North American culture in terms of appreciation of alternative food. As such, they argue that food "alternativeness" has "come to be associated with an intensification of differences between (North) American and (Western) European food cultures and politics" (page 389).

But, even on the North American continent, cracks have started to surface in the landscape of the cultural and corporate food imperialism of the USA (for overviews on US food imperialism, see Friedmann, 1995). These cracks start at the global scale and run all the way down to the local regulation of the body. At the macroscale, Manning (2004) and Schlosser (2002) have garnered much media attention for provocative and probing research that makes explicit connections between what North Americans eat and its relationship to wars like that in Iraq (Manning), and to class injustice in parts of the American South (Schlosser). Manning (2004, page 43), for example, has followed the food chain back to the war in Iraq by arguing that every single calorie that Americans eat is backed by about ten calories of oil. This is because agriculture in the USA is not so much about food as it is "about commodities that require the outlay of so much energy to become food." He goes on to note that processed foods use about ten calories of fossil-fuel energy for every calorie of food energy they produce.

Processed food is also the food of North America's poor and working class. Not only do they consume the most sugar [and are therefore are those who suffer most from the diet-related health problems such as obesity, diabetes, heart disease, etc

(Morland et al, 2002a; 2002b); see Wrigley (2002) for related evidence from the United Kingdom], but they are also the exploited workers of the industrial-food industry. Arguably some of the most horrific working conditions in the United States are to be found in the food industry. Major food corporations have a history of (1) denying workers rights to unionize, (2) opposing minimum-wage laws (Wendy's and McDonald's), (3) having some of the highest workplace injuries (IBI meatpackers), and (4) producing some of the worst sexual harassment cases in the workplace (Berta, 2002; Schlosser, 2002).

Furthermore, North Americans have now felt first-hand some of the trade and economic sanctions associated with 'mad cow disease' (Boame et al, 2004) high levels of PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) in farmed salmon, and the controversial use of GMO (genetically modified organism) crops (Warick, 2003). In addition to these economic shocks to the system, there are also cumulative environmental costs associated with the loss of family farms and farmland, and the increase in water contamination which in turn is linked to industrial farming. As food miles become longer and longer (the average distance traveled by a pound of produce is 1500 miles (Pirog and Benjamin, 2003), more and more roads and trucks are required to transport these commodities. Further up the food chain, retail consolidation is leading to unsustainable and inequitable spatial patterns in the form of continuous sprawling fast-food suburbs and 'food deserts' in urban cores (Wrigley et al, 2003; see also Morland et al, 2002a; 2002b).

Moreover, North Americans (especially poorer ones) are experiencing diet-related health problems associated with eating unhealthy processed foods. The Canadian Heart and Stroke Foundation recently warned that "fat is the new tobacco", citing new statistics on the obesity epidemic in Canada (Katzmarzyk and Janssen, 2004). In North America, 30% of children eat at a fast food restaurant every day, and almost half (47%) of Canadians are overweight or obese. The implications of these findings are profound for the future health of the next generation and for the survival of our public healthcare system in general.

Taken together, such factors as mad cow disease, GMOs and public health concerns are having the effect of pushing more and more people into eating foods that have one or more of the characteristics of being tasty, fresh, traceable, and locally produced or sourced. Although some of these consumers ('foodies') are motivated by the style or status that comes with consuming specialty food, others are motivated by deeper philosophical concerns.

One movement that has caught on in North America is the Italian-based 'slow-food movement'—a blend of politics, social consciousness, taste, and sensuality (for more on slow food see Murdoch and Miele, 2004). The movement now has chapters in North America and is seen as an alternative to a fast-paced, fast-food, North American lifestyle. The movement places emphasis on the saving of regional foods and small producers, seeking to revive and celebrate taste and sense—something seen as missing from North American cultural life. According to some scholars, North America's 'fear of food' and 'fear of pleasure' are deeply ingrained in North American culture, with some pointing to America's puritan roots as the reason behind the general distaste on this continent for the pleasures of eating and drinking (Eisen, 1997).

The slow-food movement has been charged with elitism, but it is not, its proponents argue, primarily concerned with being elitist but, rather, with promoting healthier and more sustainable food practices. It has worked to rebuild small farms lost to hurricanes, to provide school lunches for children, and to rebuild historic food-production facilities. The movement, although elitist on one hand, also has a strong social component. In fact, there is a *strong social model* behind much of the innovation within the alternative-food system (Kaltoft, 2001), as the following examples of local urban

innovations attest. Two examples include the Greenmarket program in New York City, and local policy changes and ordinances against US food giants.

Greenmarket is a program of the Council on the Environment of New York City, a privately funded citizens' organization in the Mayor's Office. The program promotes regional agriculture and ensures a continuing supply of fresh local produce for New Yorkers. The first food market was established by a civic entrepreneur in 1976 in the Union Square area. Today there are forty-two markets in thirty-one locations in Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx, and Staten Island. One third of these markets are located in low-income areas, in an effort to bring quality food to people in parts of the city hardest hit by obesity and malnutrition (van Donkersgoed, 2004). Greenmarket also provides educational programs to low-income families, particularly nutritional information on the benefits of fresh food to single-mother families and seniors. Participants receive coupons to buy food from local markets so that they can experience first-hand the resources available in their own communities. In 2000 over 250 000 customers frequented the markets every week in peak seasons and over $800 000 in Farmers Market Nutrition Program coupons were redeemed. This program provides market stability to local farmers and improves access to healthy food for some of New York's poorest neighbourhoods (Stromolo, 2004).

Over the last few years, urban school boards (Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia) in the United States have led the way on the ban of the sale of soft drinks and other sugary beverages in schools. Despite the lucrative cash which these vending-machine programs bring, cash-strapped school boards have responded to pressure from local parent groups and students advocating healthier school food for their children. Another locally led political innovation has been the recent success of Measure H, a grassroots movement to ban production of GMO crops and livestock in Mendocino County (north of San Francisco). The county is the first in the USA to make this move.

These examples have strong roots in social policy. They are also examples of local political innovations occurring in spite of unsupportive regulatory regimes at the international, national, or state/provincial level. What we would like to know is how innovative food firms fit into these alternative food initiatives.

3 Core research questions and case study

Our core research questions aim to determine the connections between the regulatory regime that the Canadian government is promoting and the food innovation system that is emerging in urban centers. To what extent does what is happening 'on the ground' with alternative food firms represent an alternative innovation system that has the potential to offer a more socially inclusive economic development model? What are the implications of this for multilevel governance in cluster formation and policy? In addition, how does our research inform our theories about innovation systems, urban creativity, and governance? To explore these questions further, we chose to examine innovation within Toronto's creative-food industry, which we defined as small and medium-sized businesses working to provide locally grown, organic, specialty or culturally appropriate food, for local and/or export markets. To provide an informed contrast, we also interviewed larger, more conventional food firms and institutions in the region.

Toronto is an excellent case-study area in which to explore these questions. First, Toronto is a complex, dynamic, contradictory, and ambivalent space. The city is a site of aesthetic, social, political, and economic contention. Economically, it is the engine of Canada—accounting for half of Ontario's GDP. It is one of the fastest growing regions in Canada with currently 14% of the population, generating almost 20% of the GNP. Its economic strength is its diversity, both in manufacturing and in the

service economy. Food straddles both these camps. From a manufacturing perspective, food is the second-largest industry in the city, employing 25 000 people and generating Can $15 billion in sales annually. Most of America's branch plants are located in Toronto (Pepsi, Kraft, Minute Maid, Kellogg's, Nestlé, etc). On the service end of the spectrum, Toronto has the fourth-largest restaurant culture in North America thanks to its diverse population. With over 2000 food producers, 1000 food-processing establishments, and 8000 restaurants, almost 250 000 people are employed in this urban food system.

Most notable is Toronto's strength in specialty-food products. The fastest growing subcomponent of the industry is the small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) which employ 75% of the industry's workers. It appears that the majority of these SMEs are the result of new company formation rather than relocations from other jurisdictions (Toronto Food Policy Council, 1999). The numbers of these new companies have grown by almost 9% over the past five years and this is expected to be the fastest growing group of food processors (at a rate of nearly 7%) in the future. The specialty-food sector is the second fastest growing (at just under 9%), and is expected to be the fastest growing sector over the next five years with a projected growth of 12% (Bohl and Bulwick, 2002). These firms appear to be developing significant niche markets for value-added specialty-food products. The diverse demand has arisen in part from multiethnic communities designing new, culturally appropriate quality products, but also from a growing health consciousness in the city (Bohl and Bulwick, 2002).

4 The research methods

Our research on the specialty-food economy in Greater Toronto is part of a larger body of work that seeks to understand regional development opportunities and challenges across Canada (Wolfe and Gertler, 2001). "Innovation Systems and Economic Development: The Role of Local and Regional Clusters in Canada" is a five-year study examining the impact and importance of cluster-driven innovation in Canada. The study is exploring how local networks of firms and supporting infrastructure of institutions, businesses, and people in regions across Canada interact to facilitate economic growth. The project examines more than twenty economic sectors across five regions, both in newly emerging areas (such as biomedical, photonics/wireless) and in more traditional sectors (such as automotive and steel, and food and beverage). Both metropolitan and nonmetropolitan regions are included.

The project involves a network of over thirty researchers drawing upon a similar set of questions related to internal firm dynamics around the innovation process and the broader institutional setting within which the firms operate. However, each research team has also devised its own set of questions according to the unique innovative dimensions of the sector under study. The questionnaire for the food and beverage study contained up to forty-two questions on personal motivation, company background, research strategy and innovation, networking, relationships, suppliers and customers, locational and infrastructure factors, role of research institutes, local cluster characteristics, social capital and future trends, challenges, and opportunities.

The results reported in this paper are based on sixty-five interviews (fifty-five formal interviews and ten information-gathering sessions) (table 1, over). Figure 1 (over) is a contextual illustration of the interview locations in the Greater Toronto Area and surrounding region. The interviews lasted from one to three hours, and in some cases included facility or retail tours. These discussions took place between January 2003 and June 2004 with food producers, distributors, processors and retailers; nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) including food-security experts and consultants; restaurateurs and chefs; educational institutions; the media; and municipal,

Table 1. Summary of food industry key informant interviews, January 2003 to June 2004.

	Large	SME[a]	Government	Other institutions[b]	Total
Producer		3			3
Producer/processor		1			1
Processor	8	16			24
Distributor	1				1
Distributor/retailer	1	3			4
Retailer		3			3
Retail/processor		1			1
Government			8		8
Restaurants		5			5
Other institutions				15	15
Total	10	32	8	15	65

[a] SME—small and medium-sized enterprise.
[b] Other institutions: colleges, universities, nongovernmental organizations, associations; one association is particularly responsive to the needs of multinational companies.

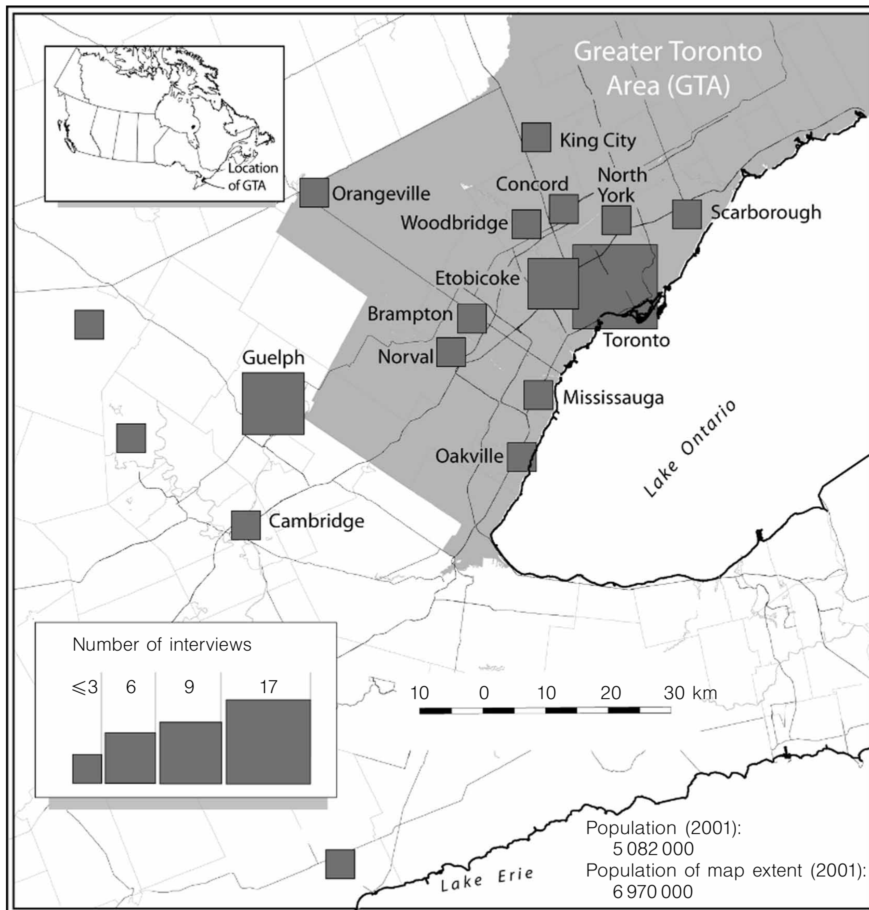

Figure 1. Map of study area, Greater Toronto Area and surrounding region, 2004 (source: Statistics Canada).

provincial, and federal government officials. Our interest in the innovative dimensions of this sector of the industry led us to ask a series of questions about the extent to which extrafirm relationships matter in helping firms become more innovative. We also sought to understand better the relative importance of local, national, and global relationships and knowledge flows. Although the focus of the interviews was on alternative food SMEs, 20% of our interviews were with the larger, more traditional firms and institutions in the industry. We were mindful not to exaggerate the divide between these two subcomponents within the food industry. Nevertheless, our results indicate that the mainstream and alternative food sectors do draw upon quite different sets of actors, philosophical motivations, and socioinstitutional settings (Blay-Palmer and Donald, 2006).

5 Research results

In this paper we report on the sources of innovation and indicators of social inclusion. First, we report on how key informants identified personal motivation, external events, the role of the urban centre, and other extrafirm relationships as sources for innovation. Next we provide indicators of social inclusion including (1) improved opportunity for interaction with diverse communities, (2) improved access to quality food, (3) improved urban – rural connections; and (4) better labour conditions and prospects.

5.1 Sources for innovation

Scales that emerged as sources for innovation ranged from the individual to the organization. At the individual level, issues of personal, family, and environmental health and safety were the most common reasons given for the creation of innovation. Personal, societal, and environmental health concerns are apparent for one specialty food processor who observed:

> "I have dietary issues from eating conventional food. My passivity about food purchases led to me overwhelming my body with certain food groups ... . I bought organic oranges and was able to eat them with no pain despite having been unable to eat oranges since childhood ... . North America is a giant petrie dish ... . Children are sick. How much is being caused by the food we eat? Our air, our water ... we are worried about terrorists. This is nothing to worry about in comparison to what we are doing to ourselves" (organic food processor, 11 February 2003).

In this and similar cases, the motivation for innovation comes from internal factors. Most of the companies we interviewed were in the business because they wanted to produce what they perceived to be a better food product than was currently available in the mainstream market. For this processor it was the fear of what is in conventional food that led her to organic production.

Although offering the consumer a better tasting product was always important, the fear factor also came up as an interesting philosophical motivation for producing a new product—as reflected in this comment about public perception of food quality:

> "The general health of the population exerts an influence, especially the occurrence of unusual health problems such as allergies and pre-pubescence. There are food-related environmental problems as well as GMOs" (processor, 18 February 2003).

The extent to which this 'fear of food' may in fact facilitate the industrialization of the organic industry in North America warrants further study. If indeed North Americans are more motivated to reduce pesticides than they are to reconnect with local tastes and sustainable economic practices, then the difference between North American and Western European culture and politics could intensify (Whatmore et al, 2003). Another motivation for many of the food companies interviewed came from outside the organization. In these instances, the personal goals of the consumer have become the driver for organizational innovation. As one retailer stated,

"We cater to the urban consumer that is educated with an inclination to be concerned about health .... This is an area with a population that appreciates great tasting food, and is knowledgeable about what they want to consume. For them, food is a priority" (food retailer, 13 February 2003).

In the case of the organic industry, value is derived from the

"continued public perception that organic is real and organic is the real deal, public perception is really the key to the value of the industry" (distributor, 22 April 2003).

In a broader context, the urban centre serves as a site of innovation where new market, civic, and local state conditions converge to create unique niche opportunities. One urban food policy expert noted the relevance of the urban centre to this innovation process:

"Most of the real innovation is happening in urban areas, especially [in] Toronto ... Toronto is a hotbed of thinking, I feed off that .... Toronto has been critical to development of the network ... an ideas cluster .... The people and the problems of the food system [are] acutely obvious in a big city that drove the gathering of the cluster" (urban food-policy expert, 18 March 2003).

This is an example of the 'urban experience' itself acting as a catalyst for new ideas in food production, distribution, and consumption. This respondent also described the motivational dimension of the problems of hunger, poor nutrition, and the lack of access to a continuing supply of fresh food for many in the city (on issues of food access and urban hunger in Toronto see also Koc et al, 1999). This food-policy expert works for a local organization that is part of a network of civil society entities that have developed an alternative supply-side distribution system to address the problems of food access and security in the city. The deep social divides that are acutely obvious in a world city like Toronto are key motivational components that constitute part of the 'urban' factor in new systems of social production.

Toronto's cosmopolitanism is another important aspect of its food system. As this urban food-policy expert said:

"innovation happens because we are a large market. We have the demand for a variety of product because of the diversity of the population base and the strange economic circumstances we have more varied demand. We have an ethnic market and supply as people bring skills from around the world .... We pick up the trends ... earlier than other urban centres" (urban food policy expert, 15 April 2003).

However, according to one key informant innovation happens despite government programs, not because of them:

"We live in Southern Ontario where there is great diversity. Food makes this clear. We can access food that is multi-cultural. This is happening regardless of government programs. In some cases the government is a blockage, for example street food and public health regulations" (NGO food expert, 15 April 2003).

One of the problems for creating innovation identified in the interviews was the lack of explicit government support for this emerging subsector:

"In the larger context the problem is that within agriculture there is no food policy in Canada, no conception of an integrated food policy sector. Agriculture does not understand its place in the food sector. The real understanding of food seems to be coming more from [local] public-health units" (urban food policy expert, 18 March 2003).

A consistent theme in the interviews was that the real food-policy innovations were coming from the creative think tanks in the city core (local government, and NGOs). This reinforces the thesis that the urban is the site for transformative politics that present an alternative to 'actually existing neoliberalism' (Brenner and Theodore, 2002). Part of this transformative politics is about the everyday practices of social inclusion found in the spaces of the creative food economy.

5.2 Social inclusion spaces

In our research we found evidence of social inclusion in four areas of the creative food economy: (1) improved access to the spaces of diversity and to the learning of others; (2) improved access to healthy and quality food (3) improved urban – rural connections; and (4) better labour conditions and prospects. We take the position that 'social inclusion' is not simply the opposite of 'social exclusion'. Earlier research on social inclusion tended to assume that if poverty, racial discrimination, class inequality, or sexual prejudice were diminished, then a more inclusive society would necessarily result. However, more recent research suggests that "social inclusion has its own logic; that is, in thinking and practicing social inclusion, we must give equal weight to both social inclusion as a goal and a process" (Donald and Morrow, 2003, page 16, drawn from Stewart, 2000). The process toward a more inclusive and enriched society can be better understood, and ultimately achieved, by breaking down the social inclusion literature into three stages: (a) eradicating exclusion through tolerance, (b) promoting inclusion through the acceptance of others, and (c) celebrating difference, by recognizing that our exposure to different cultures and experiences enriches us all as human beings (Donald and Morrow, 2003). We view the following discussion as only beginning this process in our thinking about food and inclusion in a cosmopolitan and multicultural city-region.

Take our first example of diversity. Acknowledging the importance of diversity is essential to understanding identities of others. Yet the goal of social inclusion is not just to tolerate diversity as an end in and of itself, but also to validate and embrace it. From a practical standpoint, this requires a more proactive approach that calls for the removal of barriers or risks, requiring investments and action to bring about the conditions for inclusion. At a more conceptual level, it requires us to confront "the dilemma of diversity without at the same time simply naively celebrating it" (Mannur, 2004, page 2; see also work more generally on race and geography by Kobayashi and Peake, 2001). Food is an excellent area in which to explore these practical and conceptual dilemmas. In our interviews we heard about the relationship between a more diverse society and Toronto's dynamic food economy. As one processor put it,

> "ethnic diversity in south western Ontario makes it [the food industry] very dynamic" (13 June 2003).

Not only from an economic perspective: this diversity also enables an "opportunity to explore"—it is a "gateway to humanity". One food activist spoke about Toronto's diverse population and their cultural expressions through food as a

> "really interesting experiment in a new way of diversity of living" (NGO food expert, 15 April 2003).

So much of this "diversity of living" is evident in the "vibrant food culture" that defines Toronto. Blowfish, a fusion restaurant with Japanese, classical French, and pan-Asian influences, "run by a Jew, a Muslim, a Hindu and a Buddhist ... is a child of Canada's multicultural experiment ... . This fusion generation with its bicultural or multicultural heritage is the face of the new Canada. A face more visible in the country's big cities, it comprises a generation in the process of negotiating new spaces at the juncture of its cross-cultural past and its Canadian future" (Wiwa, 2003, page 1).

Part of the process of negotiating new spaces is ensuring that we do not conflate food with a positive logic of inclusive multiculturalism (Donald and Morrow, 2003; Mannur, 2004). Food is one of the most affirming dimensions of cultural identity, and it is often also the first and only point of contact that many in mainstream Canadian society have with ethnicly diverse and racialized Canada. Mainstream Canadians' exposure to ethnic food does not necessarily build tolerance, acceptance, or an embracement of other cultures and ethnicities. However, these spaces of cultural food expression in Toronto are opportunities to engage individuals in intercultural living and

learning, an important aspect of building a more inclusive community grounded in respect for differences. This respect for human rights has traditionally been a key component in the shaping of Canada's foreign and domestic policies. Canadian public policies of multiculturalism and education have done more to facilitate the unprecedented boom of this creative subcomponent of the food sector than have explicit public policy food initiatives.

The only example of a public policy food initiative that has a more explicit connection to Canada's multicultural heritage is found in Toronto's City Plan, which directs the Toronto Food Policy Council to advocate on behalf of food security. Toronto is considered a North American leader in food security, defined as the right of every citizen to access adequate quantities and quality of culturally appropriate food every day (Rocha, 2001). With food security recognized in the City Plan, and with a Food Policy Council to advocate on behalf of food security, Toronto has a policy basis from which to advocate for food rights (Stromolo, 2004). This has translated into better access to healthy and culturally appropriate food for many Torontonians—our second indicator of social inclusion opportunity.

Through NGOs, people in Toronto are gaining access to better quality food. As one NGO official explained,

> "Our intent is to help poor people get access to local [and quality] food. We provide 4000 [food] boxes per month. [These boxes contain fresh fruits and vegetables.] The boxes are available to everyone; we use an inclusive model. All the boxes are subsidized. We address the issue of hunger.

This official went on to explain how her organization's foodbox program represented an

> "interesting policy shift to make food available to everybody".

She added:

> "We are contributing to the discussion about what will make good social policy."

This NGO is still connected to the key question of how low-income people get access to good-quality food, but it is also connected to a larger group of people in the city who want local food and/or culturally appropriate food—people, for instance, who want to participate in alternative food networks. As a result, this organization has

> "a direct relationship with 10 groups [which] source almost exclusively for certain [food] boxes" (NGO food expert, 15 April 2003).

This leads into our third theme. Part of getting better quality food to the urban population is reconnecting growers and consumers. Venues such as farmers' markets, community-shared agriculture, and foodbox programs are all helping to accomplish this goal. The purpose of these alternative food-distribution systems is to support more sustainable urban–rural connections. As one key informant remarked,

> "It makes sense to have community-based agriculture, to keep the circle complete in the community. When you isolate the transportation of vegetables it makes you ask why we are doing things this way (that is, transporting food over long distances) … Instead we need a local based economy, we need to look back as a means to a basic and happy lifestyle" (alternative food processor/producer, 24 March 2003)

Closer ties to urban communities can also translate into new markets for growers. As a restaurant manager observed:

> "It is getting easier to access Chinese vegetables locally. We have farmers that specialize in Chinese vegetables. Farmers are meeting the demand as there is demand from the larger, non-Chinese population. The demand through fusion cuisine is seen as a niche market opportunity for farmers" (ethnic restaurant manager, 20 May 2003).

This is an example of the convergence of the cultural diversity found in Toronto and of the innovation that takes place as new markets emerge so that farmers have a broader market to supply and communities are able to access food that is appropriate to their cultures.

At this stage of our findings, we have been able show how Toronto's creative urban food industry presents an opportunity for social inclusion, especially in the areas of (1) improved access to spaces of diversity, (2) improved access to a continuing supply of quality food (both materially and also culturally); and (3) improved urban–rural connections. We now turn to a more contentious indicator: (4) labour conditions.

North America's food industry in general has always faced criticism for its labour conditions and prospects. The industry is labour intensive with recruitment and retention a top concern for most food operators. The Toronto industry is no exception. The labour-turnover rate is currently between 40% and 60% per year. Several factors contribute to the recruitment and retention challenge, including irregular hours of work, perception of low wages, a negative perception of the industry generally, language and cultural issues, lack of formal training and educational opportunities, and lack of demonstrable career path. The workforce overwhelmingly consists of women, youth, and visible minorities with no postsecondary education and incomes below the regional and national average. Most are employed on a part-time basis with little or no job security (Viduci and McConnachie, 2001; see also work by Barndt, 1999).

The industry by its very nature does have many low-skill entry opportunities, but it has also been deskilled over the years. One of the key reasons for this deskilling has been the gradual replacement of labour with capital-intensive technology in food processing and preparation (City of Toronto, 2004).

In contrast to the more mainstream food industry, many firms working in the creative urban food economy actually require more labour involvement as they are returning to higher labour involvement in food preharvest and postharvest, processing, and preparation. In some cases this opens up the possibility for even greater labour exploitation, for example, through the use of migrant workers in the preharvest and postharvesting stages (Buck et al, 1997). In other cases, however, it presents an opportunity to reskill workers in the food sector. As one artisan baker explained about the training they give to their employees,

> "The training is not easy. We rotate [our employees] through the whole bakery so they get experience with all of the stages" (artisan baker, 2 February 2003).

The baker told us that this training process takes over one year, and results in skilled workers. Similarly, a retailer explained,

> "Our working style is relatively unique. There is a commitment to team members. Innovations come from the ground up, team members are empowered and so they speak up. This creates a different environment where people have a say. This impacts everything we do" (SME food processor, 13 February 2003).

These may be exceptions but they do nevertheless illustrate how the industry could significantly raise its profile as providing a viable career option rather than simply a low-wage, low-value job.

Currently, there is no overarching institution responsible for creating an environment that rewards long-term human-resource strategies in this industry. Training is sorely lacking and, although it may be too early to tell the extent to which the alternative-food industry offers a more stable, higher skilled, higher wage work environment, our research indicates that the innovative firms within the food industry are creating a human-resources environment that rewards long-term human-resource retention strategies. This is the first step toward achieving more sustainable labour prospects in the industry. At the moment, there appears to be an opening opportunity

for a regional or national employment council to address some of the labour-shortage and labour-retention challenges facing this sector.

From a research perspective there is a need to explore further the labour conditions in the food industry in this area, as this is a significant aspect of cultural production that is often overlooked in the literature on cultural clusters. The cultural capital possessed by these workers is not only significant in terms of their status and position within the local labour market but also has implications for social inclusion in the creative food economy. Further probing is required, for example, regarding the relationships between working practices and cultural capital in terms of how knowledge, skills, and aesthetics are deployed in the urban creative-food economy.(1) This raises many important questions regarding the relationships between food, power, race, gender, and class in the production of cultural clusters—all themes that are largely underdeveloped in the cultural-clusters literature.(2)

6 Conclusions and implications

Our research findings have some important implications for multilevel governance in cluster formation and policy, future research agendas on food, and for theories on innovation, clusters, and urban governance. In terms of policy, one of the most striking observations in our research was the disconnection between the vibrant growth of the creative-food industry (local, organic, artisan, ethnic) in Toronto and the government regulatory regime that promotes agrifood. In fact, the macroregulatory regime seems stacked against local food innovations. The international regulatory regime, through bodies like North American Free Trade Agreement and World Trade Organization, currently promotes public procurement policies that make it very difficult for national and subnational governments in Canada to shift public procurement towards supporting locally grown, nutritious, quality food.

The institutional rigidity that exists in Canadian government departments with respect to food policy is not surprising given that the national and provincial food policy direction over the last few decades has been about biotechnology-related innovation and export-market opportunities (Blay-Palmer, 2005). For instance, less than 1% of the total federal research budget of Can $292.5 million for 1999 was targeted toward alternative (including organic) forms of agriculture: the remaining 99% supports agrifood biotechnology-related innovation and export opportunities. As such, a tight high-tech agrifood cluster has emerged in Canada among big farm producers, branch-plant food manufacturers, the higher educational institutions, and provincial and national agriculture departments. A case in point was a recent agrifood conference designed to provide input to the federal government's Innovation Strategy. At that meeting, agribiotechnology was assumed to be the only form of innovation within the food sector. Questions were focused on how to market the technology, not whether it was appropriate (Blay-Palmer, 2005).

The consumer-led rise of the specialty, ethnic, and local-food systems in urban areas like Toronto has been swimming against this current. It is one of the fastest growing subsectors of the food industry within the city and deserves some serious attention—not only because it is economically viable, but also because it provides an opportunity for social inclusion in everyday cultural production, distribution, and consumption. As our research has shown, the culinary delights found in Toronto are not just for the consumption of an urban elite or talent class but, rather, offer opportunities for a more socially inclusive sustainable urban development model.

(1) The authors would like to acknowledge one of the referees for his or her clarity on this point.

(2) More work on cultural capital by workers in clusters is starting, however (see Holmes et al, 2004, for example).

Local farmers as well as grassroots and other civic organizations are benefiting from the demand for specialty and local products by the production and sale of alternative and organic produce, the provision of fresh food to economically disadvantaged communities, and the innovative solutions that have been developed to feed the hungry. The foodbox model described above has been in existence since 1985 and has been copied by other cities across Canada and around the world. But, despite the success of such programs, many are still understaffed and struggling for funding.

As such, there is clear potential for federal and provincial government involvement in the implementation of a national food policy that promotes local, organic, and specialty food products and the development of effective strategies for nutritional security. Specific policy recommendations include the adoption, at the federal level, of a comprehensive national food-policy strategy aimed at the social, health, and environmental benefits of good food. This might include adopting more transparent labeling regarding food safety and content, as well as building better supply-side capacity for locally produced food. Other aspects of a national food policy might include promoting a healthier food-choice environment through positive public procurement and nutritional guidelines. All these changes would, of course, require a shift in thinking about the value of alternative food networks to the economy and to society.

The opportunities for further research in this area are tremendous. In this paper we report on the new urban food economy and spaces for social inclusion, but this is only a beginning. We need more empirical research on the ways in which food production, preparation, and consumption in a multicultural and cosmopolitan North American city challenges our thinking about diversity—especially our often neat assumptions about how food affirms cultural identity, race, and ethnicity. We have defined the urban creative food economy as consisting of ethnic, organic, fusion, local, and quality elements, but we now need to deconstruct these terms—understanding similarities, but also the complex ways in which they mark difference. Also, as our discussion on labour conditions in the industry suggests, we know little about how the specific knowledge of cultural workers is used and deployed regarding their status and position in the labour market (such as 'star' fusion chefs or food-preparation workers). This turns our attention more generally to the issue of how actors use knowledge in the industry—at the microlevel of the workplace but also more generally within the industry. How are powerful actors along the food-supply chain (such as retailers) manipulating meanings of alternativeness, quality, local, taste, traceability, ethnic, and fusion? There is a growing and exciting literature on alternative-food networks, especially from Europe (see, for instance, Harvey et al, 2004). However, we need more comparative work between jurisdictions. As we asked above, will North Americans' 'fear of food' intensify the difference between Europe and North American food economies and cultures? Also, how is 'alternativeness' conceptualized differently? What about comparative food research work between as well as within cities? Cities, have in general, largely been ignored in this research, as most scholars to date have focused on food in the context of rural development. Yet, as our research has shown, so much of the dynamism in the food economy is a result of the new demands and ideas of urban dwellers.

These are just some examples of new research directions on food inspired by our initial results. Yet, conceptually, our results also have implications for several current debates within the innovation and urban governance geography literature more generally. First, our results demonstrate the need to remain skeptical about the 'cluster concept' (Martin and Sunley, 2003; Simmie, 2004). The notion of the 'cluster' within the innovation systems literature is still a hypothesis, not an assumption. Even though the food industry operates within a deep institutional environment, the creative-food

industry is still fragmented and disconnected. Alternative 'ideas' seem to be the glue that embeds Toronto's creative-food network. These 'ideas' are coming out of some very progressive local government departments and nonprofit organizations. However, this aspect of the industry might have been hard to discover if a cluster had been assumed because of the local concentration of firms, customers, government, and private institutions (à la Porter, 2000).

This finding supports the regulation-theory-inspired tradition that institutions act as socializing agents which instill a particular set of norms or attitudes in those who operate within them. This is where the unique characteristics found in a large, dynamic, metropolitan environment may work together to create new forms of knowledge creation and innovation. This leads to our second point, the importance of the 'urban' extra-firm relationship in the social systems of production.

This urban dimension has several components: proximity, concentration, knowledge flows, buzz, cosmopolitanism, unorthodoxy, and boredom. Specifically, we are interested in the combined existence of the intense concentration of people, infrastructure, institutions, and open learning with the social and psychological experiences of urban life. It is not enough simply to study the ways in which proximity facilitates local industrial practices. We know from the work of economic geographers that proximity (in the context of face-to-face interaction and a 'local buzz') can reinforce and sustain norms and codes of conduct that facilitate learning, information exchange, and overall innovative capacity (see, for example, this literature summarized in Bathelt et al, 2004). The immersion of firms in this environment of shared goals can bolster the success of industries in a place as firms are able to assess opportunity. But proximity can also lead to institutional rigidity and social control if there is not receptiveness to learning or openness to new ideas.

This underscores to us the importance of knowledge flows (Bryson et al, 2000; Gertler, 2001; Pinch et al, 2003). The concentrated flows of people, ideas, and movements in and out of a deeply cosmopolitan city can erode rigid conventions of thought and expression. In the context of economic activity, Bathelt et al (2004) argue that thriving firms tend to be those which are embedded in a dynamic local community but are also building and maintaining global communication channels (what they term 'global pipelines'). These are the firms that remain outward looking and tap into international trade fairs, conventions, and other professional and/or international gatherings for ideas (Maskell et al, 2004). Other global lines of communication that can also be important to firm innovation include international social and/or environmental events such as, in our case, international movements like GMO-free food, slow food, and/or other transnational events like global ethnic-food fairs or world food-security conferences.

What is significant from an innovation perspective is that these flows can facilitate unconventional thinking and practice, especially when they flow through a dynamic cosmopolitan community. Knowledge from global pipelines brings firms up-to-date on the latest research and can also create a local 'buzz' in the firm's home place. Given our particular emphasis in this paper on the alternative-food industry and its potential for transformative politics, we argue that there is also another urban dimension at play: that is, the symbiotic relationship between buzz and boredom in everyday urban life.

Specifically, we have drawn upon the ideas of Lefebvre (1991) and critical urban political geographers like Brenner (2000), Harvey (1990), Kipfer and Keil (2002), and Soja (2000). Two insights from this literature deserve mention. First, that space is highly contested and is part of a dialectical process between itself and human agency. And second, that much of the production and reproduction of space occurs in the everyday, even trivial, practices of human life—in other words, what Lefebvre has

referred to as 'quotidian' practice. According to Borden (2001, page 12), "everyday life emerges as both the site of increasing domination on the part of capitalism and also one where resistance, recovery and reassertion of other sociospatial practices may occur. The everyday is not the banal, trivial effect of politics, but the place where politics are ultimately created and resolved." If we apply this line of thinking to our study of the everyday practices of the alternative (or creative) food industry, we see how resistance can be found in the everyday practices of food production, distribution, and consumption.

For instance, many of our most innovative firms in the food-processing industry are motivated by their resistance to the increasing domination of a global capitalist industrial-food system. Some are part of new sociospatial practices, such as alternative forms of food distribution that seek to rebuild the supply-side capacity of local-food production and distribution to 'urban food deserts'. Others are shaping, as well as responding to, new consumer demands for local, ethnic, organic, or fusion foods. The extent to which these contested sites of everyday food practice are being, or will be colonized by an urban agro-industrial or food-retailer elite is yet to be determined. By the same token, the extent to which these practices contain the seeds of a successor to 'actually existing neoliberalism' is also not known. What we can say, however, is that many of these practices in the creative-food industry are seeking to promote and sustain an aspect of urban life that enhances individual and societal growth. There are elements of elitism within these models, but that does necessarily imply a shortcoming nor a lack of opportunity for social inclusion.

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