



In Common or Enclosed: A Comparison of Farmers' Market Development in Poland and the United States

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

How do alternative food networks (AFNs) cohere as a recognizable, global initiative against the dominant industrial food system (IFS), even in differing locations and social contexts? And how can their most visible venues, farmers' markets, through commoning practices foster the development of a food commons in different contexts? Here, we compare farmers' markets in Poland and the United States using central/peripheral empirical research to uncover their efficacy in practicing and sustaining a dynamic food commons. We track similarities that suggest potential for building a networked movement and identify challenges that can lead to re-enclosure of the food system.

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INTRODUCTION

While the industrial food system (IFS) positions food as a commodity that may be exploited for private profit while feeding a widely distributed populace, Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) can be considered a form of collective action that reconceives food as a public good, or commons. AFNs directly connect consumers and food producers, thereby creating both economic links and social bonds that constitute new social and organizational practices (Grivins, et al., 2017; Goszczyński, et al., 2019). Re-conceptualizing food as a commons underscores the many dimensions of food and allows us to see the transformative power of this organization (Vivero-Pol, 2019).

The IFS, profit based and scaled to feed widely distributed populations, has become the dominant approach to resolving calorie deficits but at the same time pushes toward the limits of natural resources. Many customers and producers involved in AFNs perceive them to be better “alternatives” to the IFS’s ethical, environmental, and economic limitations (Farmer, et al., 2014). Smaller scale AFNs, of which farmers’ markets are one marker, offer a contrasting system of food provisioning that foregrounds collective action and reconceives food as a commons (Robinson, et al., 2021); however, their transformative power is still debated (Fendrychová & Jehlička, 2018; Zhang & Barr, 2019). Studies of AFNs show they also have limitations, especially in terms of social exclusion, overrated economic effect, and unclear impact on regional development (Tregear, 2011).

We investigate farmers’ markets, the marquee event of AFNs, to understand their potential to perform a food commons that offers an alternative to the dominant industrial food system. By comparing farmers’ markets in two countries, Poland and the United States, we identify factors that might impact their effectiveness in supporting a commons; suggest the coherence of farmers’ markets as a recognizable, distributed, and global response to the industrial food system; and identify longer-term challenges to this movement as it matures. Specifically, we consider these comprehensive questions: How do alternative food networks (AFNs) cohere as a recognizable, global initiative against the dominant industrial food system (IFS), even in differing locations and social contexts? And how can farmers’ markets, their most visible venues, foster the development of a food commons in different contexts?

While the two countries we compare differ in many socio-historical dimensions, the farmers’ markets in Poland and the US similarly position themselves as alternatives to the IFS. Both seek to develop food as a commons by intentionally navigating individual and collective needs,

using food as a lever for social problem solving, and attempting inclusive governance practices in order to create a more sustainable food system. Their similar social-cultural factors also allow us to identify threats to their long-term viability, which may compromise the potentially transformative impact of AFNs (Vivero-Pol, 2015).

Our comparison brings the dominant research approach developed in the Anglo-American contexts into conversation with those outside that core (Fendrychová & Jehlička, 2018; Smith & Jehlička, 2013). The dominant, or what Fendrychová & Jehlička (2018) call “central,” investigative lenses for farmers’ markets currently emerge from Anglo-American research, leaving a geographic knowledge gap about which factors transcend those localities and apply to “peripheral” areas such as Central and Eastern Europe. For example, notions and dimensions of the past may be poorly transferred from one context to another, resulting in faulty explanatory factors. In addition, the language of analysis developed in the Anglo-American context makes a strong mark on how AFNs in other areas, including Central and Eastern Europe, are framed. Seldom do these two perspectives encounter each other in one article, with the result that “findings tend to replicate and confirm rather than challenge and extend the extant knowledge and theorizations” (Fendrychová & Jehlička, 2018, 1). However, the study of farmers’ markets is especially apt for such a conjunction, appearing as they do in very different local contexts yet sharing features. Thus, our analysis leverages not only a comparison of farmers’ markets from different national and local foundations but also the different scholarly backgrounds of the authors.

THE COMMONS AND THE COMMONING OF FOOD

Elinor Ostrom’s notion of a “commons” has been iterated in a robust scholarly literature (1990). In her view, a commons involves common-pool resources that “are or could be held, used, or governed collectively” (International Association for the Study of the Commons), such as a pastureland, fishing area, water system, or knowledge base. A commons does not depend on the nature of the resource but rather on the way a society organizes collectively around it to produce and manage it. A social construct formed by intersections of social, economic, environmental conditions (Frischman, 2014; Bolier & Helfrich, 2015), commons can be distinguished from the non-commons by whether people cooperate or compete for the resource. In this sense, commons must be understood as a social construct, constituted by collective

action. They are in dynamic interplay with management decisions and ecological regulation; communities by their practices produce this essential resource that, by its nature, reciprocally constitutes those communities. The performance of social space and the practices around the resources are called “commoning” (Dardot & Laval 2014) and are understood as a form of governance.

Although the IFS manages food as a commodity, major remediation efforts to the system are necessary to sufficiently feed the world’s population. While it is largely privatized, or enclosed, within the IFS, food has the potential to be managed collectively, as commons-implicating social-cultural, economic, ecological, and logistical systems. Indeed, examining those instances where food is treated more intentionally as a commons allows us to better understand the dimensions and roles that support it as a human right (Rundgren, 2016).

The term “alternative” in AFNs reflects deliberate positioning to distinguish these practices from the prevalent IFS regime. Originally, AFNs were defined by low-input, time-intensive methods that were out of reach or undesirable for large-scale producers, such as those described as “natural,” “organic,” “grass-fed,” and the like (Goodman, et al., 2010). As more IFS food products co-opt those process descriptors, AFNs have focused on their “alternative” relationships enabling production and distribution (Corsi, 2018; Goodman, et al., 2014). For example, alternative to the IFS’s long supply chains, AFNs have emphasized their more “direct” connection between producers and consumers (Grivins, et al., 2017). More direct connections through AFNs allow for new social relationships, institutional arrangements, and collective action (Grivins, et al., 2017) that reposition food as a public good that knits together market and social value.

Such food “commoning” implicates actions (or ongoing practices) in a social context, what the International Association for the Study of the Commons (IASC) refers to as “doing things together.” Commoning food treats it as a shared resource that is collectively governed and invites practices that support “sharing and participation” (IASC). Zhang and Barr describe food commoning as activity that “enacts changes in how members contextualize and anchor their social relations to one another with regards to sourcing food as a commons,” making food part of community building (2019, 771). We use the term “food commons” to refer to food as a social resource that harnesses natural resources to bind people together in a place for a shared sustaining purpose. Belonging to the social realm, commons and commoning, like “community,” are ongoing processes enacted through relationships. To the extent they are visible socially, linguistically, and physically, the commons

become symbolic of the community (Fournier, 2013). The practices of “doing things together” constitute the social and material reality of the commons. At a farmers’ market, for example, food consumers and producers meet as members of the same community, enacting social reality through their exchange, a reality embedded in local socio-historical context.

When the IFS commodifies food, it reduces its multiple values and dimensions to its market price (Szymanski, 2014). Profit maximization becomes the driving justification for food production (Vivero-Pol, 2017). A food commons, on the other hand, assumes food is a shared resource collectively governed and thus centers the notion of food as a right. AFN practitioners navigate different levels of governance, including those designed for the IFS (e.g., health regulations, taxation, insurance, transportation, aggregation), in order to manage a collectivized effort to bring food to consumers in ways and types that are atypical. Embedded in the IFS and the modern monetary economy, AFNs do not eliminate the sale of food but emphasize their role as a civic sector that still relies on market mechanisms while engaging philosophical and social ideals of food-including food as a right. They intend their commoning practices to work toward reshaping social relations among individuals (Zhang & Barr, 2019). Which is not to say that all farmers’ markets or AFN providers and patrons are equally anti-hegemonic. Grasseni (2021) observes that some AFN participants have greater understanding of social inequities and are more willing to act on issues of food justice and food access than others; for example, in their analysis, U.S. participants are more activist than those in Italy.

METHODOLOGY

While deeply embedded in a given context, farmers’ markets are similar enough to constitute a genre of social performance that is served by a multi-sited ethnographic approach (Marcus, 1995). Multi-sited ethnography remedies the artificiality of single-sited attention and attends to increasing global interconnectedness, the flow of ideas, and the sharing of economic models and cultural currency. While small AFNs have geographically limited impact, multi-sited ethnography helps us see them in a wider context with the potentially greater impact of networked phenomena. Indeed, the potential impact of AFNs is global when multiple local institutions with similar operational values offer counter-hegemonic resistance and viable change strategies through their communication and connections with each other. Moreover, as Smith and Seyfang note, markets are spatially positioned to influence

the dominant paradigm, often from locations in urban centers and other high-influence sites (2013, 827).

In this article, we compare case studies of two AFNs in two different countries invested in the global industrial food economy, the U.S. and Poland. These countries can be described as sitting at the relative center and semi-periphery of economic influence, scientific knowledge creation, and AFN innovation (Fendrychová & Jehlička, 2018). We compare these cases by context (Grasseni, 2021), proceeding from the specific characteristics of each case to describe the meaning given to a food commons in each network. Our comparison uses Jose Luis Vivero-Pol's rendering of Elinor Ostrom's Social-Ecological-System (SES) framework that disaggregates complex systems to make them available for comparison along material, nonmaterial, social, and ecological factors (McGinnis & Ostrom, 2014; Robinson & Farmer, 2017). Vivero-Pol emphasizes the social dimensions of Ostrom's framework for food commoning, describing four key characteristics (2019, 26):

- Natural or cultural resources, including traditions, agricultural knowledge, recipes (related to Ostrom's "resource units")
- Communities who share the resources (related to Ostrom's "actors")
- The commoning practices they use to share equitably (related to Ostrom's "governance system")
- The purpose and moral narrative that motivate and sustain the commoning practices by the community (related to Ostrom's "resource system").

Using these factors to compare food systems may reveal, for example, that traditional open-air food bazaars that have been the basis for farmers' markets in Eastern Europe differ from the Western farmers' markets that have come to define AFNs. Although they may similarly make direct connections between producers and consumers possible, they simultaneously differ in social importance for the participants, including in terms of social capital, economic advantage, and race (Kopczyńska, 2017; Farmer, et al., 2014). We study both farmers' markets as a "system," "embedded in the complexity and diversity of everyday life" (Zhang & Barr, 2019, 775). Although we cannot claim that they represent experiences at all AFNs, this comparison gives us a broader perspective that can suggest principles that are widely applicable.

Our collaboration is a cross-cultural one, rooted in our national backgrounds. This has required explanation of social, cultural, and economic histories of the two countries.

We have chosen these two markets because they present significant similarities. Both are based in middle-

sized cities (350,000 for Bydgoszcz and 150,000 for Monroe County, Indiana, in which Bloomington is located). Because of the cities' relatively small size, farmers are able to access their populations more easily than if they were in larger urban areas. Both cities have relatively affluent populations that are drawn to these markets for the quality and healthfulness of their food. Thus, both markets are poised to develop communities and foster social relations.

Our case studies center the core method of ethnography, participant observation, supplemented with participant interviews (structured and unstructured) and casual conversations with a range of interlocutors. Our methods focus on the social world to understand motivations, decisions, and meaning-making of actors and their organizations, while providing "reasonable" provision of privacy for participants and interlocutors when called for (Association of Social Anthropologists, 2021, 2). We engaged with each market and its participants for different lengths of time depending on the lifespan of each market. Specifically, the Bloomington market began in 1974, and our continuing research there began in 2005. On the other hand, the Frymark market began in 2014, and our ongoing research there began in 2019. As a result of this difference in time span, for example, numbers of interviews ranged from a dozen to over a hundred with market leaders, vendors, customers, and others. Our questions centered on the motivations to engage with farmers' markets, including values, community, goals, and insecurities. In addition, we both have investigated other AFN sites to increase our understanding of social interactions in these types of contexts. Consent was obtained from interviewees, or interviews are anonymized. Our ethnographic approach is enriched with theoretical, historical, and quantitative approaches, as cited.

CASE 1: FARMERS' MARKET IN FRYMARK, POLAND (FRYMARK BYDGOSKI)

CULTURAL RESOURCES SUPPORTING FARMERS' MARKETS

The food market is a traditional form of trade in Poland. In the past it was one of the most popular forms of trading goods, not only food. During the socialist period, markets were spaces where the informal economy bloomed (Kopczyńska, 2017). The 1990s, a time of transition, brought even more interest among Poles in these markets, in part because one could find foreign products there. Joining the EU allows broad access to trade networks and has thus reduced the role of these markets. In 2020 in Poland, there

were 2047 marketplaces (Biernat, et al., 2021), and their number is steadily dropping, in spite of EU efforts to revive them. The results of a survey from 2019 show that 20% of Poles declare that food markets are their most common place of obtaining staple food (PwC Polska, 2018). On the other hand, some large cities in the last 10 years have seen a resurgence of farmers' markets for "foodies" and wealthier people, as the food sold there is of a very high quality, often with organic certification, but also greater expense. Moreover, what was once a space focused on trading food has also become a form of recreation, creating a ground for mixed uses.

COMMUNITIES INVOLVED IN FARMERS' MARKETS

The Frymark market began in 2014. It was organized by two people who needed a space to sell their products and who were motivated to connect with other alternative growers in order to address the health needs of their ill child. At the beginning, just a few farmers were interested in selling food on a regular basis—once a week. Most farmers in the area at that time were selling their food only during occasional festivals. The Frymark leaders asked only some of these farmers to join the market, based on relationships and

trust. Those who decided to sell at the Frymark Market in the beginning were undertaking some risk because it was not obvious if it would be profitable for them and persist long term.

The market's first location was in an underground musical club. Up to a few hundred people attended, but not all of them were buying food. The space was not big enough to accommodate a larger crowd, but as importantly, the goals of the market and the club were not entirely compatible. The club was not always open when the market wanted to be open, and it also was not adapted for people with disabilities. Thus, the market moved to another, bigger location where the number of customers doubled. That arrangement lasted for 3 years until an infrastructure problem arose, due to some city construction. Although the market leadership asked local authorities to resolve the problems, they did not.

This problem triggered a move to the market's current location in a shopping mall (see Figure 1). There they have been able to open every Saturday for 4 hours while being charged for only the cost of electricity and water. During the winter they are able to utilize an indoor area, while the rest of the year most of the traders set up in front of the building. Thus, the arrangement with this retail-oriented



Figure 1 Spices of the World being sold at the market in Frymark, Poland, after moving to the shopping mall. (Photo W. Goszczyński.)

entity has offered a good location and good conditions to operate a farmers' market.

Consumers at the Frymark Market are more conscious of their membership in an alternative community than those who appear in the festive shops that serve as a backdrop to the market's location. They readily share that the experience of shopping at the market provides them with quality food and a sense of community that make the higher prices acceptable for those who can afford them. In interviews, customers reveal their main motivations to participate are largely personal: for their health and their family members' as well as for a sense of security mediated by traditional, quality food, while there is no environmental or sustainability driven motivation. Another noted the tradeoff of quality vs. quantity and the exclusion of those without adequate incomes: "I don't buy everything I want, because it is expensive, and these are not large quantities.... I can see that younger people are sitting there ... but they do not go shopping" (Consumer, Frymark Farmers' Market). Both vendors and consumers come from this same social group, as they are quite wealthy, well-educated people. However, the activity does attract other people who are not able to participate because of the expense of the food. In other words, although customers accept the common

narrative that quality food is worth more, not all who might participate are able to.

Vendors note their motivations are for higher retail prices for better quality: "My idea is that if I do something, I want to go for a higher price, I tell the client directly that the price is higher, because there are no [quality or production] concessions here." (Farmer, Frymark Farmers' Market). The vendors perceive themselves to be filling a need that stands in opposition to the IFS: "People are looking for taste [here], they are looking for quality because they feel that they are being deceived in the [rest of the] world by buying conventional products" (Farmer, Frymark Farmers' Market).

Overall, the Frymark Market creates space for relations between farmers and consumers: "One can't find intermediaries here, only producers. This place, this institution has been created to facilitate selling food directly from producers and at the same time to connect consumers with producers to create positive consumer habits" (Producer, Frymark Farmers' Market; see [Figure 2](#)). But the phenomenon goes beyond simple economic exchange: "I gain take from them [(consumers)] all the time. I have a feeling that it's not just me giving to them. I'm not talking about finances anymore, that I take money, but that I also



Figure 2 Vegetables being sold indoors at the market in Frymark, Poland. (Photo W. Goszczyński.)

get everything they bring with them. It's a good word that they will come and say. I draw energy from them."

COMMONING PRACTICES

The Frymark farmers' market accomplishes a form of commoning as food consumers and producers meet as members of the same community, enacting social reality through their exchange. The market's leader stresses that the relations between the consumers and producers and especially among producers are becoming more permanent, with better mutual understanding. Some farmers exchange their products with each other. Overall, the market functions as a space of connection and mutual aid, even while certain conflicts and unequal status (envy) persist among participants.

While recently farmers are asking to join the market, at first the organizers had to seek out farmers to bring their products for sale. Now, they prefer certified organic products and are in the position to accept only certified-organic vegetables, though some other high quality nonorganic products from local farms are also allowed.

In all cases, the organizers create the rules and evaluate potential products and vendors based on their own judgment, describing themselves as using non-democratic approach. For example, they ask farmers to take steps that some consider nonessential, such as using recyclable packaging. In addition, even though many consumers are vegan or vegetarian, the market sells meat, which one market leader projects may become a flashpoint for debate because some customers consider the sale of meat to be unethical. However, the market's leader also notes that they do not propose a vote or other democratic process for navigating this decision.

They stress that this market is a private, commercial event so they are allowed to set their own rules and those enable farmers to charge higher prices. At the same time, they undertake to educate consumers, explaining why good food has to be more costly. Likewise, producers often talk with consumers about their farming and other production processes, implicitly asking buyers to share their expectations and collaborate on their needs. In these ways, the market practices underscore a common understanding of the efforts and value of commoning food. Even while, like most social spaces, it is far from a harmonious utopia.

PURPOSE AND MORAL NARRATIVE TO MOTIVATE AND SUSTAIN THE COMMONING PRACTICES BY THE COMMUNITY

Leaders of Frymark Market collect surplus food and share it with those in need. And they hope to expand their space for food sharing activities in the future. However, cooperation with already existing intuitions has not yet been successful.

Indeed, cooperation with the local authorities is generally difficult. Even when asked for assistance, local authorities don't provide it: as one consultant put it, "Local government operates on a terribly formalized basis, and it is difficult to do anything with them." Representatives of the city declare that they are open to new projects and like the idea of a farmers' market, but they don't take any real steps to support the development of the Frymark Market. Similarly, other public institutions, such as farmers' extension centers, are fond of the market's achievements but offer no concrete support for their work. As a result, the market participants expect that grassroots and private efforts will need to continue to motivate and sustain the community.

CASE 2: FARMERS' MARKETS IN BLOOMINGTON, INDIANA, USA

CULTURAL RESOURCES SUPPORTING FARMERS' MARKETS

Farmers' markets in the US are generally perceived as positive economic, social, and environmental building blocks (See, for example, [Warsaw et al. 2021](#)). This view is reflected in federal, state, and municipal policies that support these popular food initiatives, such as grants for small farmers, purpose-built public venues, and comments by high profile public officials including former First Lady Michelle Obama, Department of Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, and small town mayors including Bloomington's John Hamilton who identifies a vibrant farmers' market as part of the "natural energy and creativity [that can be harnessed] to make our city even better, and for all people" ([USDA 2023](#); [Miller, Thompson, & Kalb 2013](#); [Sadler 2016](#); [Horsley 2009](#); [USDA AMS 2022](#); [Hamilton for Mayor 2023](#)). Farmers' markets articulate with longstanding national narratives about the value of self-reliance, about contact with nature promoting health and well-being, and about the social compatibility generated by "melting" together diverse American groups ([Emerson, 1841](#); [Thoreau, 1854](#); [Zangwill, 1908](#)). Participants invest farmers' markets with elements of the American "public square," a shared space that bridges individual and community interests that is referenced as early as William Penn's plan for the city of Philadelphia in 1683 ([Reps, 1956](#)). The success of this vision shows in the growth of farmers' markets in the U.S. over the last 50 years, from a few hundred in the 1970s to over 8000 in 2015, according to the US Department of Agriculture ([USDA, 2015](#)).

COMMUNITIES INVOLVED IN FARMERS' MARKETS

Although the American Midwest is renowned for its deep topsoil, flat expanses, and large commercial farms, the Bloomington area in question often sits on karst caves

and sinkholes, eroded ridges, narrow valleys, and clay-based soils. As a result, the area includes many small-acreage farms with marginal economic viability for the families (USDA 2017). Nationwide, over the past 90 years, specialized larger farms are getting larger and the number of smaller farms, which incubate alternative and sustainable agricultural practices, is decreasing (Spangler, Burchfield, & Schumacher, 2020). Farmers' markets and their higher retail prices can represent an important revenue stream for such small farmers as well as helping them to achieve their social, environmental, and ethical goals.

Bloomington featured open-air fruit and vegetable stands on the central courthouse square until a more modern (less rural) look was desired between the World Wars (History and Heritage, 2007). By 1974, interest in food quality and processing reemerged, and a small group of citizens convinced the city council and the mayor to establish a farmers' market that would "connect backyard gardeners and small farmers with consumers" (Robinson & Hartenfeld, 2007, 71). The first market launched at a public city park on a Saturday in July, 1975, with 23 vendors, using both so-called conventional and alternative growing methods. From the start, this new venture was imbued with an awareness of political implications. For example,

one man sold his organically-raised produce to resist mainstream American wastefulness and environmental destruction, while a woman vendor intended to put off entering a workforce that, she said, limited women to secretarial and other low-status "typing" positions (conversation with Robinson). As a vendor would put it almost 50 years later, growing and selling food this way "is our protest" (conversation with Robinson).

While the market moved among various city-owned locations over the next 23 years—from the city park to the courthouse square to a parking lot—it grew from a couple of dozen vendors to average 58 vendors with an average total of more than 50,000 customer visits over a summer season (City of Bloomington, 2006, 3). In 1998, despite some public resistance to its expense, the city customized a public parking lot to support the market, with roofing, electricity, picnic tables, a bandstand, and access to bathrooms (see Figure 3). Over the next twenty years, as many as 12,000 customers (10% of the surrounding population) visited on high-season Saturdays, patronizing as many as 140 farm and prepared-food stands (Veldman conversations with Robinson). According to municipal surveys, the market became the most popular event or service in the city (Robinson & Hartenfeld, 2007, 75–76).



Figure 3 Bloomington, Indiana, public market, 2006. (From Robinson and Hartenfeld 2007.)

Both customers and vendors came from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds, though they reflect the surrounding populations, being mostly white and of mostly middle- and working-class backgrounds (Robinson and Hartenfeld, 2007). Customers in Bloomington and other Indiana markets tend to be female, white, older, and more educated than average in the surrounding areas (Farmer et al., 2014). Vendors representing their stands at the market are predominantly but not exclusively white and present a mix of other demographics: ages, genders, ecological and economic politics (from mainstream conservative capitalist to right wing libertarian to left wing cooperative, communistic, or sustainable), primary professions, farmland ownership status, new to multi-generational experience farming, ethnicities, and religious affiliation including atheist, Amish, Christian, Jewish, Mennonite, Muslim, and non-denominational (Robinson's fieldwork).

COMMONING PRACTICES

Bloomington is a university town that draws students, scholars, and community members from across the country and around the world. As a high-profile weekly event, the farmers' market supports exchange between not only customers and vendors but also cosmopolitan and provincial concerns, traditional and innovative life choices, conventional and alternative farmers, different economic classes, and diverse social arenas. In addition, the city employees who run the market, along with many vendors, work to broaden access by offering/accepting food vouchers and welcoming diverse constituents, including by featuring culinary, ethnic, and education programs such as a salsa competition, Asian culture demonstrations, fresh-food cooking tutorials, and breast cancer awareness. Political lobbyists, special issue activists, and others peddling ideas instead of food can also set up a booth in the "Info Alley" section of the market for a nominal daily fee (\$20 for the first month and \$10 thereafter in 2022) or just outside the market proper for free. In addition, buskers (e.g., musicians, mimes, jugglers, dancers) perform for tips at no charge. Finally, commoning practices are forged through recipe trading, cultivation advice, promotion and debate of ideas, news sharing, romance, and the like.

PURPOSE AND MORAL NARRATIVE TO MOTIVATE AND SUSTAIN THE COMMONING PRACTICES BY THE COMMUNITY

A governing narrative behind the market is that commingling populations promotes social good and that the market was contributing to the social good in this way. This narrative was tested in 2018 when husband and wife vendors were uncovered as participants in White supremacist discussions online and documented as members of the now-defunct

White nationalist group Identity Evropa (sources are from Robinson's fieldwork unless otherwise attributed; Healy, 2019).

The ensuing protests, mostly against but also in support of the White supremacist couple, included physical confrontations, civil disobedience, arrests, picket lines, space occupation, implicit and explicit threats, and public shaming ("doxing" on social media). Liberal/radical protestors demanded that the city eject the vendors while the city insisted that to do so would be a violation of Constitutional free speech (see Figure 4). In August, 2019, the City suspended the market for two weeks under threats of violence by White militia. When the market reconvened, many customers and some vendors ceased attending—because of fear of violence by the police or by protesters on the right or the left, revulsion at the presence of White supremacists, and/or reluctance to be associated with White supremacists.

In 2020, the prevailing market narrative of social inclusivity and harmony underpinning the market had fractured. Many vendors, customers, and members of the broader community demanded that city officials remove the White supremacist vendors from the market while the city continued to maintain it could not do so without violating their right to free speech. Underscored by the national civil rights reckoning sparked by the murder by police of George Floyd, a Black man, local debates grew to question the desirability of free speech, the purpose and funding of the police, and the responsibilities of government. Some charged Bloomington's officials and the city's predominantly White populous with not only neglecting the concerns of residents of color but also actively excluding them from and through institutions encoded with systemically discriminatory policies. The market, more than any other event or institution in the city, became the local emblem of the national failure of American inclusivity.

As a result, the longstanding municipal market, itself, fractured into at least eight smaller, competing, mostly private markets, effectively dividing loyalties and splintering the local food economy. Some new markets were galvanized by protest, incorporating social-political litmus tests, pledges, or behavioral guidelines for farmers. People of color stepped into leadership roles at several markets, and women continued to outnumber men in leadership positions. By 2021, two new cooperative storefronts run by farmers pollinated across politicized divides by including vendors from all the local markets. At least one storefront explicitly included discussions of food rights and other civil rights from its inception.

Meanwhile, the White supremacist vendors ceased their farmers' market activities in 2019 and noted on their website in 2022 that they are "not 'open' to the public for produce



Figure 4 Antifa in Black Bloc formation protest White supremacists at Bloomington, Indiana, public market, 2019. (Courtesy Martha L. Crouch.)

sales via farm stand on our property henceforth” ([Schooner Creek Farm LLC, Announcement, 2022](#)). Instead, the couple opened a business reselling coffee “by our people, for our people,” with clear allusions to White supremacist and anti-Semitic sentiments ([Legan, 2022](#); [Above Time Coffee Roasters, By our people, 2022](#); [Above Time Coffee Roasters, For our people, 2022](#)). Despite the outcast vendors’ multi-year absence from marketing, some leaders at the new, private markets continue to excoriate participation in any market but their own, saying, for example, “all of those Vendors [at other public and private markets] are fine to work with along side nazis” [sic] ([Anonymized, 2022](#)). Thus, the question remains whether privatization of the local food system will support food commoning any more sustainably than earlier public efforts did.

DISCUSSION

The Frymark and Bloomington markets have enough similarities to identify common characteristics while also highlighting the importance of distinct social and historical

contexts. A comparison of the two cases underscores important considerations in whether participation in a food commons, both created and fostered by farmers’ markets, can re-shape the IFS.

MARKETS CAN BE IDENTIFIED AS A COHERENT GENRE EVEN ACROSS DISTINCT CONTEXTS

The markets in Frymark and Bloomington have strong similarities that support features of social life that are widely recognized as positive, including bringing people together around a core service that contributes to quality of life. In both cases, the networking of small farmers began as a corrective to corporate food providers. At both sites, people describe the market as a site for a valued community, learning from others, and sharing their knowledge. Their similarities demonstrate that even markets from diverse contexts can be considered of a kind.

COMMONING PRACTICES ENACT THE MARKET COMMONS

Both the Polish and American markets we studied moved locations over time yet retained a sense of a

community. In this sense, the practices not the place create a commons, and we observe similar practices that support the commoning process: those who participate on a regular basis become acquainted and form social bonds enacted through politeness phenomena, information sharing, and economic exchange, elastically extending social networks. Many of the “focused gatherings” (Goffman, 1961) of a market often remain situated there: people gather for a limited time to address their compatible desires, fears, and aspirations. Other connections spill beyond the market perimeter as knowledge sharing, romance, employment, political action, and other facets of social life. Thus, buying beloved and novel products in the midst of familiar conversations both produces and sustains the economic and social logic of a farmers’ market. Over time, a process of mutual learning—through which producers and consumers share products, knowledge, and other concerns—strengthens the importance and value accorded market food and its production practices. Further, while farmers’ markets can impact social relations, positive ecological impact may follow from improved growing practices (Zhang & Barr, 2019).

CAPACIOUS SHARED NARRATIVES SUPPORT A FOOD COMMONS EVEN WHILE PEOPLE’S PARTICULAR MOTIVATIONS MAY VARY

Overarching shared narratives may elide differences that groups within a market community experience. For example, while most customers focus on their personal and household food needs, most farmers focus on their business needs. In the Polish case, customers were motivated to participate by the access to quality food while the Polish farmers were motivated by the individual economic benefits of establishing a market. Similarly in the U.S. case, farmers seek the higher prices possible through direct marketing in order to support individual lifestyle choices and social ideals while the U.S. customers seek fresh, tasty, and nutritious food in the context of a supportive community. In both cases, market constituencies respond, explicitly or implicitly, to how the dominant food system has not organized around food as an essential good, a market narrative that can override differences in religion, political party, age, career, and so on. Markets can create an alternative space—and a narrative to support it—that accommodates participation even when participants’ goals and characteristics differ. In the U.S. case, the high-profile public debate around the participation of White supremacists is a sign of the sometimes painful commoning process required for creating a dynamic community space.

COMMUNITY ACCESS IS ESSENTIAL TO A FOOD COMMONS BUT RESTS ON SPECIFIC HISTORICAL ROOTS

In both cases, the economics of farmers’ markets create certain social inclusions and exclusions. As aggregation sites for small-scale producers, markets often sell at premium retail prices that exclude lower income shoppers. In the Polish case, higher retail prices mean higher social-economic-status customers, effectively excluding individuals with lower incomes. In the U.S., some markets, including in Bloomington, accept and enhance low-income food vouchers to combat this problem; however, any solution is complicated by the national histories of class and race. Customers and potential customers who are people of color disproportionately occupy lower social-economic tiers, according to national and local statistics (Creamer, 2020), which inhibits their full participation in markets that, typically, post premium retail prices to support small producers. Complicating matters in the U.S. case, producers themselves come from diverse capital associations—some with incomes closer to those excluded customers, some with social capital similar to more affluent customers (including education, race, and agri-politics), and some with both. In the Polish case, the problem of diversification is going to be a challenge in the future. Increasing demographic, ethnic, and economic diversity in Polish society, mainly from immigration crises like the wars in the Middle East and Ukraine, will present challenges to community building at markets and beyond.

GOVERNANCE AND COMMUNITY ACCESS ARE EMERGENT PROCESSES THAT MUST BE REGULARLY REVISITED

Our cases confirm that, although markets rely on collective action to satisfy individual needs via an alternative to the dominant food system, they do not inevitably transcend mainstream social systems and power relations. Inequities can persist or emerge that impact who participates, the rules of engagement, and future directions. For example, although the Polish market addresses the needs of groups of consumers and producers, it operates as a private, nondemocratic organization and lacks support from public institutions that would allow it to grow. Established by two producers personally motivated by their need for high-quality food for their sick child, the individualistic origin of the market persists in its privatized governance. Moreover, although this market thrives, it has been unable to access public funds that would help expand its service to economically diverse populations. In the U.S. case, a decentralized, grassroots group of vendors and customers gained

strong municipal support nearly 50 years ago, including investment in public staffing and other infrastructure. In time, however, the city population further diversified while the administration of the farmers' market overlooked opportunities for new input, dissent, responsive improvement, and updated narratives.

CHALLENGES AND CRITIQUES CAN URGE MARKETS TOWARD COMMONING OR ENCLOSURE

In Frymark, participants acknowledge that the market's high prices exclude people in need, and in response, they resolved to donate excess food to emergency food programs. However, when those connections failed, they organized their own donation scheme, although on a smaller scale than desired. Similarly, many producers at the public Bloomington market donate unsold food to private nonprofit organizations for redistribution to low-income populations through food banks and kitchens. In addition, the Bloomington market facilitates the use of national food vouchers, doubling or tripling their value with public and private funds. Other private markets in the Bloomington area seek to replicate and expand that access by prioritizing their volunteer labor around grant applications and distribution schemes. Thus, challenges to both markets and critiques in the case of Bloomington urged these markets toward commoning practices that broaden their constituencies.

We note, however, that greater public access to local food is not an inevitable development in farmers' markets. In Poland, some cooperatives have excluded vendors who are strong supporters of the conservative government or who are opposed to COVID-19 vaccination. In Frymark, the two market leaders approve vendors based on their expectations, trust, or any other requirement they alone decide. In Bloomington, the creation of alternative private markets created as a result of the White supremacy crisis made it politically palatable (or even ethically possible) for some vendors and customers to participate in marketing; however, the new private markets operate outside particular legal or Constitutional mandates, and some require political pledges or training before participation. Moreover, even though outspoken White supremacy has not reemerged at public or private markets in the area, the chilled atmosphere has continued, driving some longtime vendors and customers to abandon participation at any site. Thus, both the Frymark and Bloomington cases suggest that enclosure of the food commons always looms as a possibility and indeed may be an inherent characteristic of social organizations that must continue to be examined not only by researchers but also by participants and communities.

PRACTICING AND SUSTAINING A FOOD COMMONS

This study offers important vantage points for the study of the commons and food commons in particular. Food networks in "peripheral settings," such as post-socialist countries like Poland, are often read through the "central" theories drawn from the Anglo-American contexts, resulting in an elision of differences (Fendrychová & Jehlička, 2018). Our comparison shows substantial differences, including in individual participant motivations and institutional governance, yet still yield similarities that suggest a commoning phenomenon, created by common practices, that can be useful for resisting the IFS.

In addition, our study's comparative perspective highlights the reification of local logics that narrowly bounded case studies may be subject to. Specifically, in this paper, a "central" academic and economic locale (the U.S.) directly encounters one more clearly on the "semi-periphery" (Poland) where it adapts some new models from the core into the longer-term local context but without shaping the scientific discourse in the center.

Instead of rejecting this comparison as too similar or too different to bother with, we find that these cases and our differing academic perspectives defamiliarize important commonalities and differences that might otherwise be overlooked. For example, one might underplay how socio-economic "diversity" is constructed and experienced differently in each case, which tasked us as scholars to uncover tacit definitions. Both markets feel "diverse" to those involved, yet the character of that diversity is quite different—from 400-year-old patterns of oppression and exclusion based on race and religion in the U.S. to newly-encountered national origins in Poland that would hardly be recognized as different in some areas of America. Similarly, economic diversity in the Polish case, coming out of the socialist era, represents a narrower range of resources than in the U.S. case that encompasses generationally impoverished families. Moreover, national conversations about population diversification and future national profiles activate different narratives in each country. In the U.S., the imminent toppling of a White majority and the displacement of "White" farmers with ones of Amish, Mennonite, or Global Majority background looks promising or threatening according to different ideologies. In Poland, the influx of non-Christians and newly scrutinized skin color suggests the potential for increased social stratification. Similarly, "civic orientation" looks different in each case, with the civic space being conceived of as a place of resource procurement for the family in the Polish case and as a space for the enactment of contested American values in the other. In both cases, these definitional differences

uncovered in our academic encounters of center and semi-periphery are operationalized in the community spaces of the farmers' markets.

This comparison also emphasizes a limitation of some other commons' studies that successfully follow Ostrom's focus on disaggregating the components of complex commons but fail to consider their continuing, sometimes confounding, complexity over time. A food commons is not a finished project but continues to emerge over time through social interactions. Thus, scholars must analyze AFNs in context and longitudinally.¹ By comparing similarly bounded cases, we find that farmers' markets are cultural events that cohere recognizably even in disparate localities. They similarly "compound" cultural resources, community creation, practices, and narratives that "motivate and sustain" a food commons (Vivero-Pol, 2019, 26). Simultaneously, they suggest the tenaciousness of local context, with differences arising from their histories, demographics, and evolving political narratives that may resist change and threaten enclosure. Thus markets may be similar enough to share models and lessons across contexts while still requiring substantial respect for locally and logistically resonant differences.

We further find that the transformative quality of the commons is both contextual and frangible. AFN participants operate within an ongoing paradox: living within the dominant system while also enacting an alternative. Practicing and sustaining commoning is central to remaining "alternative." In this sense AFNs and farmers' markets can operate as laboratories of innovation, not only in terms of sustainable agricultural technology but also social collectivity and social resource commoning, places where people can imagine, test, and refine new ways of being together. However, our two cases underscore that farmers' markets, and by extension other instances of AFNs, tend to operate like social islands, separate geographically and ideologically from the socio-political world around them while still similar enough to suggest they can have an impact in aggregate. And like geographic islands, they have permeable borders that admit less desirable ideologies and practices. AFNs face ongoing decisions and developments that implicate commoning/enclosure that remain under-scrutinized by scholars. If AFNs wish to continue as correctives to the social shortcomings of the dominant food system, they must continue to examine their own success in providing food as an essential good, staying current with demographic changes, including prioritizing inclusion for new and marginalized groups who may have important critiques.

Moreover, our comparison shows that the very institutional maintenance required of a commons must be assessed on an ongoing basis. Even, "success" can

introduce new limitations for AFNs, blinkering participants to the need to address shortfalls in transparency and gaps in social justice. We find that successful food commons do not eliminate social disagreements; rather, they serve essential nutritive, social, and economic needs of more or less diverse populations. To persist over time, AFNs must overcome knowledge and communication barriers that render them vulnerable to exploitation and dissolution. Communicating the character and importance of "commoning," as a concept, is necessary to the public conversation so that "...actors (either as individuals or as representatives of collective entities) make practical choices among their available options" (McGinnis & Ostrom, 2014, 3). Beyond rhetoric, participants in food commons, especially leaders, must attend to social acts of inclusion to sustain viability. Ongoing, transparent, and responsive processes for reflection will help to prevent the establishment of new exclusions and inaccessibilities. Shared narratives must be examined and forged anew, potentially re-centering food as a right and opening new patterns of resource distribution.

CONCLUSION

Our study is consistent with Ostrom's notion of polycentric governance that may usefully follow from disruption to sharing and stability. Shared spaces like farmers' markets, and public-private partnerships, can create interactions among diverse groups, including broadly food consumers and producers, who can meet as members of the same community, enacting a new social reality through their ongoing exchange. The efforts in Bloomington, and to a lesser degree in the newer Frymark market, indicate that they fall into what Sage and colleagues identify as a "second generation" of food initiatives designed to effect change in local systems and institutions in order to rectify social and ecological injustices by welcoming "a broad spectrum of actors" who "are aware of their ubiquitous presence, refer and connect with each other and consider themselves to be part of a heterogeneous but widespread movement ... to irritate, even to disrupt, the process of spatial production, revealing the separation, the alienation, that exists between residents and powerful financial interests" (Sage, et al., 2021, 10). In this sense, self-awareness by participants may make AFNs, collectively, a challenge to the dominant food system (Sage, et al., 2021).

Policies supporting commoning, through polycentric governance of AFNs, can help sustain food commons for the long term. While quantitative and aggregative studies of farmers' markets are useful for informing policies, participant observation and case building can

teach us about the decisions that contribute to successful navigation of challenges in ways that can be generalized and that can uncover theoretical biases. Farmers' markets are already examples of small businesses networking for the mutual benefit of producers and consumers. Scaling up this polycentricity to create networks of markets based in cooperative, reciprocal organization and economic democracy offers a prototype for new political orientation that promotes participatory inclusion and serves the community above profit.

A crisis in the commons (of white supremacy, of demographic diversification, of moving location) presents opportunities to redraw the boundaries of who is considered part of the community and to reconsider the governance processes in place. A dynamic commoning process integrates history, social interaction, and environment to define boundaries, establish rules for use and enforce rules that support communities. Farmers' markets are important components of comprehensive food networking that target food security, sustainability, healthy diets, and community building, what the EU is calling a "Farm to Fork Strategy" in its European Green Deal (Dudek & Śpiewak, 2022). Similarly, in 2022 the US government issued an \$80 million grant program to address the economic, social, and environmental challenges of more sustainable agricultural systems, including food (USDA NIFA, 2022). With due emphasis on polycentricity and context, networks of AFNs can lift farmers' markets out of small-time neoliberal commerce into engines of generative democracy. Thus, farmers' markets—as visible markers of the social-economic-agricultural food system and as platforms for education and change—deserve continued scholarly attention and critique.

NOTE

- 1 Further research will address three questions. First, to what extent does exclusion by rule undermine a commons (explicitly limiting, e.g., politics, gender, or race or with covert rationales such as location, transportation, pricing, physical impediment, cultural or ethnic familiarity, hours of operation, conduct requirements for sobriety and dress, and police presence). Second, what are the consequences for commoning of toggling between geographic and social commons, as often occurs for AFNs that repurpose for commoning what is otherwise a private space (a shopping center, parking lot, or schoolyard)? Third, can a trajectory of AFN development provide useful perspectives (e.g., from personal benefits to relationships to community building to global engagement)?

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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