Relative Locality: People, Land and Food in Fife

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Entering the Field - Literally

A rural road. A cold and miserably drizzly day. A bus journey out of town and a 15-minute walk in soggy, ankle-deep grass. All it takes, in short, to make a novice ethnographer feel thoroughly out of her comfort zone and thoroughly in the country. I arrived at the farm shop sodden and slightly disgruntled.

'What a miserable day... You drove, did you?' were the first words from Max, a partner in the business, after our brief introductions.[1] He seemed thoroughly surprised when I told him I had walked. He also seemed terribly keen to get back to work – 'stocking today – important but very boring' – and I realised I would have to settle for something more resembling an interview than 'deep hanging out' (Geertz: 1998). It was, after all, what I had expected. I had done a bit of research on the place and had emailed Max in advance, and so was prepared for the very business-like approach with which I was greeted.

I began the project because I was interested in the 'Fife Diet', an initiative which encourages people in Fife to eat 'locally' and 'seasonally'.[2] As someone who tries to loosely base my own diet in seasonal produce that comes from the UK, this is a topic of personal interest for me. I began researching local farm shops to find out why people selling and buying 'local' and 'seasonal' produce regard it as important. After all, as Ingold (2002) points out, it is an extremely widespread human characteristic *not* to eat 'local' or indigenous food.

Thus, I had made my soggy journey to Max's farm shop. I was muddy but it was immaculate. A beautiful, astonishingly white-washed barn – set in fields complete with Highland cows – filled with beautiful, astonishingly varied products. On close inspection it seemed a slightly discordant affair; imported, artificially pink, strawberry flavoured marshmallow fluff undermining the dirty parsnips from the farm. It was rustic in a cleverly planned way. Max told me the brief history of the business, initiated in 2010, and a bit about his personal history, mostly his background 'sourcing seafood for high-end London restaurants', and then swiftly left me to mull things over with a cup of tea on the house.

1 All names have been changed in order to protect the privacy of my informants.

2 http://www.fifediet.co.uk/how-to-do-it/

Looking around, I noticed a poster by the 'Fife Diet' with the legend: The Biggest Local Food Project in Europe. The 'biggest local' struck me as an oxymoron of sorts; how big can something be before it ceases to be local? Thus, 'the local' became the focus of my project. It was not as simple as seeing the poster and knowing the direction my ethnography would take, of course. But after many conversations it was clear that this concept, that of the 'local', was central, though differently defined, for everyone I spoke to.

Fieldwork as Conversation

After my enlightening but brief interview with Max at the farm shop, I realised that if I wanted to get anything really personal out of my informants, I was going to have to make my encounters less formal. I approached a Fife Famers Market nervously, with this in mind. I was unsure how to present myself to the stallholders with whom I wanted to engage with in a 'long conversation' (Bloch, 1997: 278). The possibility of calling myself an anthropologist seemed a fallacy, and likely to formalise the encounter. I decided to present myself as a customer, albeit a particularly friendly and interested one. My first questions, to a woman named Poppy who was selling herbs, were answered politely but shortly and, feeling no less nervous, I moved on to a stall selling pottery.

A couple were manning this stall, the man stood stoically behind the table and the woman in front, holding a clipboard and chatting animatedly to him. As I approached the stall she turned to me and asked 'What do *you* think of my bumblebee range? He doesn't approve!' She was referring to a display of pottery with alternating honey-coloured and white stripes. I was somewhat taken aback. I had been so caught up in my role as the questioner that I had almost forgotten that reciprocity is inherent to conversations. I considered the pottery and told her, honestly, 'I like them'. 'See!', she triumphantly declared to her husband, then turned back to me conspiratorially and told me, 'He doesn't like it when I try to make things pretty.' With a cheeky glance at her husband, 'Maybe it makes him feel emasculated. But I think it brightens up the display. I don't think it would work without the cake-stand, do you?' I was struck by the degree of camaraderie with which she addressed me and we began to chat about their work as potters.

Sian explained that they'd been commissioned by Creativefife to create a series of pieces that celebrated food in Fife. She asked me about why I came to the farmers' market, how much of my food I bought there, and so many other questions I had been intending to ask. She asked if I would like to submit 'a favourite Fife recipe' that she would paint on a plate. As we chatted about

our mutual love of parsnips, I realised that her initial questions about the 'bumblebee range' were probably just a lead-in for her to get information about my relationship with 'local' food. Thus I had an increasing sense of becoming a hybrid informant-ethnographer. I had forgotten that my informants also come to the encounter with their own agendas and questions. Sian's conversational questions made me remember this and I began to feel much more relaxed about asking questions of my own. Though their pottery was a slight deviation from my intended topic – food in Fife – the ties with farmland and mealtimes were obvious enough that it still felt relevant.

'We're not Puritans': On eating 'locally'

Sian herself emphasised these ties. She and her husband, like several of the stallholders I spoke to, describe themselves as 'committed' to the Fife Diet. This means that they try, as hard as they think is reasonable, to eat food that was grown, raised, caught or gathered in Fife. She repeatedly emphasised the element of compromise central to having a diet based on 'local' produce, saying things like, 'We're not puritans', 'It's about trying', and that they attempt to 'merge reality with sustainability'.

She and Chris dig their clay from farmland in Fife so both their pottery and their food come from the same land. However, she was quick to assert, 'I have my IKEA plates too!' but later returned to the idea of eating Fife food on Fife plates. Relationship was a key word in Sian's narrative about the 'local'. She was proud of the relationships she had created with farmers in digging clay from their land and believed they shared a mutual respect for the 'creative energy' of the earth that they both utilised in their work. She pointed out that 'our relationship with food is so often connected with clean white plates but food looks *good* off red earthenware' and obviously enjoyed the symbolism of eating food on the earth it came from.

Sian brought up issues of perception; people can often see eating locally or seasonally as something 'hippies' do. Chris told me that when representatives from the Fife Diet spoke in Dundee, students overwhelmingly felt that only people of a certain (upper) class could afford to eat this way, noting that 'organic food is more expensive in the supermarkets'. While he could see why people feel this way, he also found it slightly odd, considering that local food which is in season is usually cheaper. He blames 'decades, centuries even, of alienation from the land'. There is an element of nostalgia to their interwoven narrative, a sense of 'getting back to basics', which puts me in mind of earlier accounts of rural Britain (Coleman 1988).

A 'Coming to the Country' Narrative

Sian and Chris were passionate about 'the local' and what she called the 'tradition of the country potter'. This phrase interested me because of its focus on the rural. For Sian, and many of the stallholders I spoke to, their idea of the 'local' was bound up with ideas of the countryside. When I had asked Max, 'Why Fife?', he had responded 'It's the best farmland in Scotland'. Regardless of the factuality of this statement, it has a similar basis in the rural. It is only possible to have a 'country potter', a 'country larder' and a 'Fife Diet' in rural surroundings.

As I continued speaking to those selling 'local' and 'country' products, I began to realise the ways that their narratives, and my own, invert the classic 'coming to the city' narratives of earlier social theory (Simmel 1950). Most of my informants were not native 'Fifers'. Though there were certainly some stallholders who have a long history in Fife, in fact, most of the people who were most willing to chat to me about why 'local' produce is important were people who had moved here from urban areas. Chris had found a clay pancheon in an antique shop while on holiday in Fife and brought it home to Edinburgh to show Sian. She told me she had initially wondered, 'Why is this good?' but when Chris had shown her the fingerprints of the potter on the rim and at the base, she too had been struck by this simple piece of pottery, because of its evocation of the maker. When they got jobs in Dundee they moved to north Fife, because 'Chris wanted to be able to cycle to work', and began working with local clay. Their story is just one example of the general inversion of the migration to the urban. More and more people are moving to the countryside in search a 'locality' they see as essentially rural.

Selling the 'Local'

Of all my encounters, of which only a few can be detailed here, Sian was by far the most forthcoming. This can partly be put down to her incredibly friendly personality, and partly to her own need to speak to customers about Fife food for the pottery commission. Ultimately though, I think the most pertinent reason she was happy to chat to me was because she and her husband are potters by vocation, not merely occupation. They both work at a university, teaching art and design. Pottery is done out-with work and fulfils a 'need to make', especially for Chris. This phrase expresses how they 'believe' in what they do on a deep-seated level. Of all the people I spoke to they seemed the most invested on an ideological level with this movement of the 'local'.

Though other stall-holders and farm shop owners were willing to talk to me and answer my questions, every other conversation was pervaded with 'selling speak'. This was somewhat

unexpected; I had initially expected much more ideological discourse. However, my approach was that of a potential customer and I initiated most of the encounters by expressing interest in a particular product, which I'm sure was a contributing factor. When I asked Charles, selling rapeseed oil, why he came to the Fife farmers' markets he evaluated it in terms of sales – 'We sell almost as much here as in Glasgow, and that's our best one'. He then launched into a sales pitch: the cold-pressed oil he sells is 'healthier than olive oil, more versatile – and local too!' Here, the 'local' is an additional selling point, rather than an essential characteristic of the product or business ethic. For many of the sellers, the 'local' was considered along these lines: a handy selling point; or, particularly among older stallholders, an afterthought or a given.

For Max, the 'local' is a carefully constructed selling point of his farm shop, which is a well planned 'retail experience'. He told me his priority was to be 'realistic' rather than idealistic. Essentially, he admitted, the farm shop was a savvy business move on the part of the farm owner, capitalising on the 'trend' of the 'local'. The goal is for people to do their weekly shop there, so they stock products that are obviously not 'local' – such as bananas and oranges – in amongst farm-grown produce, with no differentiation and no indication of origin. Part of the construction of the 'local' is a partial emphasis of the Scottish character. Stereotypes are employed here, with the tartan chairs and paintings of Highland cattle, to enhance the Scottish locale.

For Bill, an elderly man selling jams, pickles and cordials at the farmers' market, the question, 'How local is the fruit you use?' provoked a perplexed, 'Well we grow it all ourselves if that's what you mean... Though we do buy in strawberries and raspberries from the farm by us to deal with demand'. Bill said this matter-of-factly, as if buying locally was the only sensible option. When I expressed interest in the blackcurrant cordial he said it was, 'Just like Ribena. Only less sweet, more vitamins, and better'. When I saw him at another farmers' market he used that same sales pitch, indicating that he does not attempt to 'sell the local' the way some other stallholders do. He told me the cordial was his favourite thing to make because it was a 'gentle' process. The blackcurrant bushes 'look after themselves', requiring only a 'gentle hand' and the steaming, pasteurising device 'gently' releases the juice. This discussion of the process as gentle and 'local' only by default was subtly different in its matter-of-factness when compared to some of the other sellers. The 'local-ness' of Bill's product was less relevant for him than the quality of his products.

Poppy, selling fruit and herb vinegars alongside her plants, also grows it all herself. Unlike Bill, her selling of these 'local' products is tied to a discourse of sustainability and tradition. She actively researches hedgerow subsistence and 'traditional' recipes. When I asked her why she sold

her products, she focused on the connection to tradition, nature and the land. However, when I moved on I heard her telling the stallholder next to her that she was considering 'branching out' to flowers because 'I think there's a market for it'. This suggests that the discourse of the traditional and natural is partially a 'selling narrative'.

At another stall the man was calling out to every person walking by: 'Chickens. Ducks. Turkeys. Free-range, natural poultry. Scottish! Local!' When I asked the farmer, Gary, about his duck livers I received a bit of an interrogation about my cooking – again I felt my role as the questioner inverted – which revealed some of his attitudes towards food. As one of the few people I encountered who considered himself to have a rural background and who had 'inherited' the 'farming life' he seemed surprised that I, obviously not 'local', cared about 'local' food. He was also suspicious of my claim that I make things, rather than getting them 'out of packets', but after this was established he seemed happy to sell me his products, telling me all of the ways I could cook his 'lovely, 100% natural, livers'. I felt that I almost had to prove myself worthy of his produce, having to sell myself as a cook before he would agree to sell me his poultry.

Jon, selling country wines, was keen to emphasise the Scottishness of 'our wines'. He told me that the fruit was from local Scottish farms; that they used traditional Scottish methods; and that it was a fairly simple, rustic affair; he described the brewing process for the oak wine as 'like making a big cup of tea'. This emphasis on Scottishness was not, like Max's, part of a cleverly planned retail experience; rather, it seemed to arise from a genuine pride in 'being Scottish'. Jon was one of the few people to describe himself as a 'local' at the St Andrews farmers' market, despite being from Perthshire, and it was his national identity that gave him this assured 'local-ness', rather than his more specific, regional identity. This brings me back to the question of the 'local'; how can this concept be defined?

Returning to the Question: The 'Local' and 'the Locals' in Anthropology

The word 'local' was ever-present in my encounters. I tried not to use it as part of leading questions and I succeeded in this in most of my encounters, despite having 'local food' as my subject, because my informants usually used it without my prompting. Since, as previously discussed, most of them did not consider themselves to be 'local', their focus on the word fascinated me. Initially I had been interested in the range of the local – how big can something be before it ceases to be local? But as my encounters continued I put this question aside to focus on what my informants told me; why they described their products as local and why it was important

to them. Many, as I have previously pointed out, used it as part of their selling technique, from a central aspect of their ethos, as part of a savvy promotion strategy, or as an appealing afterthought. Personally, they also have different reasons for 'selling' the concept. While Sian and Chris believe in their commitment to local food as life enhancing, Max hopes that using more local producers, suppliers and transporters will support the local and national economy – and his own pocket.

Obviously the concept of locality is key for anthropology, a discipline so focused on the '*particular*, and thus the *local*' (Rapport & Overling 2000: 10). Clifford (1997) has noted, however, that as anthropologists we must not rely too heavily on the concept of the local. Our fields are not, and have never been, as bounded as we would perhaps like. Things and people we would be quick to assume are 'local' may not be. Clifford urges us to consider the fact that 'everyone's on the move, and has been for centuries: dwelling in travel' (1997: 2)

Looking to the field for my informants' 'theory of the local', I realised that there is no way of distilling it, even 'gently' into a concentrated essence. The only way I can assess their manifold theories of the local is relatively. Frequent references to the 'Scottishness' of products bring nationalism to the fore. Can Isle of Arran cheese or whisky from Skye be 'local' in Fife purely by virtue of their national origin? The Fife Diet's new 'Food Manifesto for Scotland', launched after I completed my fieldwork, highlights the way the 'local' can be appropriated nationally.

Not all my informants emphasised Scottishness in their accounts of the 'local'. Amongst them, for some, the 'local' is merely a trendy concept to be used commercially; for others, the 'local' is a synecdochal concept that stands for a whole range of personally meaningful relationships. Each of my informant's concepts of the 'local' are differently shaped by their relationships with their neighbours, their food and their environment in Fife and, more widely, in Scotland. The 'locals' cannot be lumped into one category of person, and neither can their narratives about the 'local'.

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