

# THE MULTIPLE ONTOLOGIES OF LOCAL FOOD

*Examples from the Swiss dairy industry*



## MENU

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- Local food in the Swiss context
- Theoretical framing: multiple ontologies
- The scales of the local
- Provenance and/or proximity
- Market cheese and/or moral cheese

## «LOCAL» FOOD IN THE SWISS CONTEXT

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- A significant trend on the markets:
  - Migros *Aus der Region / De la région*: 898.6 mio. CHF of turnover in 2015 (+ Coop *Miini Region/ Ma Région*)
  - PDO-PGI: 33 products in Switzerland (1/3 are cheese specialities)
- A significant change in the food system:
  - Reconnecting food and place, consumers and producers
  - Better food: healthier, sustainable, reflexive consumption
- But many questions too:
  - Consumers: un-reflexive localism (Dupuis & Goodman 2005)
  - Retailers: “Local-washing”, i.e. new labels for what was already there?
  - Products: Any real difference? Do not questions diets...

## THEORETICAL FRAMING

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- Multiple ontologies (Mol 1999, Law & Mol 2008)
  - What *is* something is unstable and constructed in networks of interactions and meanings.
  - What is referred to as the same *thing* exists simultaneously in diverse definitions, in the different networks where it belongs.
  - Not only about diverging *interpretations* of the thing, but about *ontologies*.
  
- Agency and ANT:
  - ‘*it is not always clear who is doing what. Action moves around. It is like a viscous fluid.*’ (Law & Mol 2008: 72)
  
  - ‘*for assemblages, like actors, are creative. They have novel effects and they make new things*’ (ibid: 74)

## **SOCIO-GEOGRAPHICAL SCALES**

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- Local = Swiss, national as opposed to imported
    - “Swiss quality”
    - Cheese (free-trade with EU)
  
  - Local = Region, as a formal boundary
    - Political (Canton, State, )
    - Economic (e.g. Migros cooperative, area of production for a PDO, ...)
  
  - Local = “my place”
    - Subjective identification
    - Opposed to anonymous food
- Scale is a strategy, both fluid and fixed, socially constructed (Born and Purcell 2006)

## PROXIMITY OR PROVENANCE

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Two ways of connecting food and place:

- «food from somewhere» (Campbell 2009): provenancing strategy, traceability, identity, terroir, difference
- «food from here»: local networks, solidarity, proximity, short supply chain

E.g. Gruyère Cheese (PDO):

- Staple food in Romandie: supermarket specials (loss-leader), everyday consumption, 15-25 CHF/kg
- Fine food when exported: luxury grocery shops, connaisseur's food, up to 80-90 CHF/kg

→ Swiss Gruyère is **both things** at the same time and each one of these ontologies produce different effects and strategies in the industry



## MARKET CHEESE VS MORAL CHEESE (FORNEY 2016)

- Local food as neoliberalism in disguise:
  - Market strategies replacing former state protectionism
  - Relies on consumers' choice, gives a central role to marketing strategies
  - Moral values as tradable goods and a way of producing added-value
  
- Local food as alternative practices:
  - Reflexive consumers
  - Reflexive producers (quality, making a difference, etc.)
  - Solidarity in the food chain (cooperatives, local producers...)
  - Democracy and autonomisation



## CONCLUSION

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- Multiple ontologies and the complexity of food:
  - What is healthy or not and why is impacted by this multiplicity
- New ontologies help moving beyond simple criticism (imperfection is OK):
  - Production of knowledge
  - Changes subjectivities
  - Opens new possibilities
- Role of research at different level in the construction of ontologies:
  - Mediating dialogs between ontologies?
  - Criticising ontologies?
  - Proposing new ontologies?





# THANKS FOR YOUR ATTENTION

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