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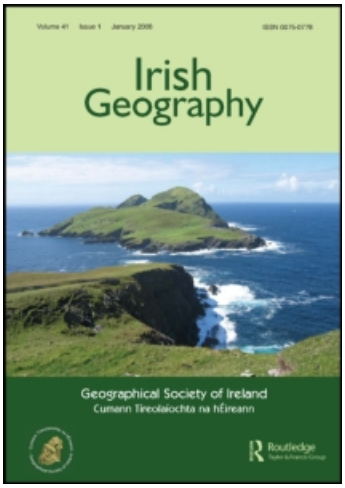

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INTRODUCTION

Re-imagining the Irish foodscape

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Limited attention has been paid by geographers to the Irish food system beyond the farm gate. Yet the last two decades have witnessed a substantial transformation in the provision of food and in patterns of consumption. This extended introduction to a set of four themed papers considers the role played by corporate retailing in refashioning the urban foodscape and in restructuring agri-food supply chains. The article aims to highlight the significant disconnection that exists between the realms of production and consumption, and outlines the potential of alternative visions and practices that offer a way of reconnecting them. Finally, the article will introduce the four papers which provide an illustration of the range and depth of analysis that geographers can bring to the study of the Irish food system.

Keywords: foodscape; agri-food policy; food supply chains

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Food consumption practices have changed remarkably in Ireland during the last 20 years. We have quickly become accustomed to the convenience of 24-hour supermarket opening, take-away food on petrol filling station forecourts and to the disposable income that makes eating outside the home accessible to all (including school children). Yet the wider consequences of these changes remain to be fully and systematically evaluated. The development of a food system built upon the principles of convenience, consumer choice and low price have had enormous repercussions for Irish agriculture, suburban planning and public health. The degree of penetration of international food businesses, especially retail multiples, symbol chains and fast food franchises, have had significant success in radically reshaping patterns of shopping and eating. While the corporate mantra is for cheaper food – 'every little helps' – it is becoming apparent that this comes with enormous hidden external costs for the farming industry, the environment and population health and well-being.

In the context of an economic downturn encouraging all sorts of reappraisals of Celtic Tiger norms, this seems an appropriate moment to take stock of Ireland's contemporary foodscape and ask: what are the social and cultural imaginaries around food at this time? What is the relative balance between care-full performances in the selection, purchase, preparation and consumption of food for nurturing, health and well-being, as against the refuelling of human bodies with cheap, tasty and convenient products? At a time when state agencies are busy promoting Ireland as the 'Food Island' in the interests of export-led growth, does it matter that imports of primary and processed foods are rising quickly? And beyond the discursive constructions of 'green' and 'authentic' foods from the Irish

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countryside, what actually constitutes everyday performance in cooking and eating, in the maintenance of rituals and nostalgia around food, and in the way our individual and collective identities are shaped by contemporary consumption practices?

In seeking to pose such questions, one of the purposes of this article is to call for more engagement by geographers in research that will deepen understanding of the forces shaping the contemporary Irish foodscape. The term foodscape can be regarded as shorthand for food landscape, as it serves to highlight the interconnections between people, food and place (Yasmeen 2008) and brings into focus social, economic and cultural relations around food (Lake *et al.* 2010). A second aim of this article is to highlight the significant disconnect that exists between the realms of production and consumption of food in Ireland today. It is quite clear that there is an urgent need for an integrated and comprehensive food policy architecture capable of bringing together core issues such as diet and health, governance of the supply chain, social justice and sustainability (Lang *et al.* 2009). A third aim is to outline the potential of alternative visions and practices in the production and consumption of food. Ireland is fortunate that, at this moment, it is host to a variety of initiatives helping to shape a different kind of foodscape from that created by mainstream corporate food actors. Given the uncertainties surrounding the global food system, with recognition of how closely interlocked food and energy markets are as well as the growing influence that climate change and freshwater depletion are having on global food stocks, supporting heterodox approaches to food production and retail might be regarded as sensible insurance. Finally, this article will briefly introduce four papers arising from a conference panel and which together make up this mini 'special issue'.

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Background

The sustainability of contemporary food systems across the world is being increasingly interrogated from social, economic, environmental and ethical perspectives (e.g. Singer and Mason 2006, Patel 2007, Roberts 2008, Goodman *et al.* forthcoming). Industrialised farming systems have come under increasing scrutiny (Kimbrell 2002, Pretty 2002, Tudge 2004, Mazoyer and Roudart 2006, Weiss 2007), yet the farm sector is struggling to maintain economic viability as a consequence of the commercial power exercised by corporate retailers (Vorley 2003, Fulponi 2006). The logistics of food supply chains with their globalised sourcing impact on local agriculture. It severs links between farmers and consumers resulting in loss of trust in food (Jackson *et al.* 2008) and is encouraging further bioengineering of things we eat (Roberts 2008). Meanwhile, products are travelling increasing distances from field to plate (Jones 2001, Pretty *et al.* 2005), using more energy (almost entirely fossil fuels) and generating more CO_2 emissions. Some 30% of purchased food is then discarded as waste (Waste Resources Action Programme 2007, Stuart 2009). Preliminary evidence suggests that the food chain accounts for 29% of the UK's total energy consumption with a growing share comprising HGV vehicle kilometres (DEFRA 2006). A study for the European Commission suggests that what we eat has more impact on climate change than any other aspect of daily life, accounting for 31% of the global warming potential of products consumed within the EU (Tukker and

Huppes 2005). In Ireland, agriculture alone accounts for 27% of greenhouse gas emissions (Environmental Protection Agency 2008).

Understanding the multidimensional and multiscalar consequences of food system transformation – in Ireland as in other places – is a challenge ultimately requiring attention to many different policy domains: agriculture and rural development, environment and planning, diet and nutrition, welfare and social inclusion, economic prosperity and employment, and so on. It is also subject to a complex and shifting institutional landscape of multilevel, polycentric governance (Hooghe and Marks 2001) involving global (Codex Alimentarius, WTO), European (DGs, EFSA), national (ministries, statutory bodies) as well as private (corporations, business fora), and civic (community, charitable) organisations each with their respective approaches to risk management (Ansell and Vogel 2006). It is little wonder that, given the complexity of such an undertaking, the consequences of the food system have barely begun to be explored by social scientists, including geographers, in Ireland.

Yet, arguably, the spread of corporate food retailing, dominating the landscapes of suburban areas and towns and further exacerbating dependence upon cars, represents one of the most significant features of the 'Celtic Tiger' era. The ubiquity of convenience foods, especially its iconic symbol the 'Jumbo Breakfast Roll', available at almost every petrol filling station across the state and immortalised in Pat Shortt's musical tribute,[1] characterised an era of dashboard dining from the late 1990s. This time bomb of saturated fats arguably made a huge impact on the nation's eating practices, its waistline and its cardiovascular system (Hearty *et al.* 2007). Obesity rates have apparently more than doubled since 1990 (McCarthy *et al.* 2002) and diet-related illnesses are all rising sharply (National Task Force on Obesity 2005). Increased consumption by children of foods eaten outside the home is also a source of concern (Burke *et al.* 2007). Yet there remain significant barriers to people accessing healthy food (Friel and Conlon 2004) as well as being able to enjoy safe physical exercise. Although there is an emerging critical geography of corpulence that rejects the discursive construction and scientific legitimation of the 'obesity epidemic' (Colls and Evans 2009, Guthman 2009), this does not detract from recognising the ways spatial injustice is reflected in access to food and health (Dowler 2008).

There is little doubt that supermarkets are the pre-eminent retailing format dominating the Irish food system and in part responsible, through their merchandising strategies, for the consumption of energy-dense, nutrient-poor, highly processed 'pseudo foods' (Winson 2004, Hawkes 2008). Dixon *et al.* (forthcoming), following Marx, refer to the metabolic rift – the disrupted exchange of nutrients between humans and nature – as arising from corporate restructuring of local food environments. Supermarkets have also played a critical role in restructuring agri-food supply chains and resulted in further pressure upon the Irish farming sector. This has become particularly evident in the horticultural sector where there has been a marked exodus of producers. With corporate retailers competing aggressively for market share, growers have come under exceptionally intense pressure as they shoulder the consequences of special promotions and discounts such as 'buy one get one free'. According to the Bord Bia 2008 field vegetable census, there were around 15 per cent fewer growers than in 2006, although the area under field vegetables had grown by a similar amount. This suggests a constant exit of smaller growers from the sector while those remaining are becoming larger and more specialised. Moreover,

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with their highly sophisticated supply chain logistics, retailers are drawn to ever cheaper though more distant sources. It is little wonder that the President of the Irish Farmers' Association John Bryan said 'the food supply chain is broken because farm families cannot survive on prices below the cost of production' (IFA 2010).

Food imports now account for a growing share of the retail market, with consumers spending €4 billion in 2007, a figure which increased by 50 per cent from 2000 (Safefood 2009). Indeed, recent figures suggest that while exports of food and drink fell by 7 per cent to €8.16 billion in 2008, imports of such products from the UK alone grew by 6 per cent in 2009 reaching almost €3 billion. Undoubtedly, this narrowing in the sectoral balance of trade has to do with the role played by multiples in displacing indigenous food producers (*Irish Independent*, 11 May 2010).

This growing disarticulation of the domestic agricultural sector from Irish consumers comes at a time of rising concerns for food security. The events of 2007 and 2008 when energy and food prices rose sharply, have led the European Commission (European Commission 2009), the UK government (DEFRA 2008) and many research organisations, such as the Royal Institute for International Affairs (Ambler-Edwards *et al.* 2009, Evans 2009) to support foresight initiatives designed to explore scenarios of future food security and consider matters of contingency. All place importance on notions of resilience, adaptation and sustainability, vital concepts in a near to medium-term future assuredly experiencing the effects of climate change, freshwater scarcity and peak oil (Gregory *et al.* 2005, IPCC 2007, IAAKSTD 2008, Bridge 2010). There is even some appreciation of the need to restore a degree of food sovereignty perhaps through selective government support for local food initiatives. Increasingly, governments and other agencies are keeping a watchful eye on the expansion of land leasing schemes which has seen China, India, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states secure large tracts of land for food production in sub-Saharan Africa, Pakistan, the Philippines and elsewhere (von Braun and Meinzen-Dick 2009). Securing long-term supplies of food and biofuels has become a strategic imperative for some states and ought to be a factor influencing the shape of agricultural and land use policy in Ireland as we move into a more uncertain future.

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Reconnecting farmers and eaters?

Yet there is little obvious sign that such issues are informing the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food which recently published *Food harvest 2020: A vision for Irish agri-food and fisheries* (DAFF 2010). This sets a deeply ambitious target for exports of €12 billion by 2020, a 42 per cent increase on the average for 2007–09. Much of these exports will comprise beef and milk (with a projected 50 per cent increase in milk output alone), suggesting a substantial increase in livestock numbers. Given the consequent increase in emissions of methane and nitrous oxide (from grassland fertilisation), the intriguing and vital question then arises: how will Ireland meet its international obligations to cut greenhouse gases by 20 per cent of its 2005 levels by 2020? Moreover, while the Department sets out an agenda for export-led growth, how sustainable is it to have a domestic agricultural sector increasingly disarticulated from national food consumption?

Food harvest 2020 notes that the 'restructuring process that has characterised Irish agriculture in recent years needs to be accelerated. Market realities dictate that

a strong commercial perspective is pivotal . . .' (DAFF 2010 p. 18). This is a salutary statement, for the state of Irish agriculture is generally not regarded as in good shape: only 18 per cent of full-time farms are considered as economically viable, and the decline in rural construction has seen a significant loss of jobs for those dependent on off-farm earnings; meanwhile, there are questions of demographic viability as the average age of farmers rises (Crowley *et al.* 2008, Macken-Walsh 2010). Yet agricultural policy appears to remain wedded to the model of global neo-liberal productivism and a belief that Irish agriculture can compete in a race to the bottom on price with European neighbours capable of achieving greater economies of scale.

But what of the majority of farmers, those who are running non-viable farms according to the prevailing commercial yardstick, but who manage important public goods by maintaining the rural landscape, conserving soils and biodiversity? While currently surviving on the Single Farm Payment and various other premia (e.g. REPS), what are the implications of further CAP reforms? Will their elimination result in land abandonment, environmental degradation and the loss of rural infrastructures? Do they have no contribution to make to more localised food economies with their livelihoods improved through value-added activities at farm level? These questions invite us to look more closely at experiences elsewhere in Europe where, in the face of large agri-commodity markets controlled by powerful corporations, farmers have started to diversify their operations by developing new products and services designed to retain more value at the farm level. It reminds us that there are a number of different potential pathways out of productivism, providing farmers are helped to navigate this route and supports are available for multifunctional 'post-productivist' rural farm enterprises (Wilson 2001, Potter and Tilzey 2005, Crowley *et al.* 2008).

Jan Douwe van der Ploeg (2008) outlines some concrete pathways, which he calls 'mechanisms of repeasantization', that have some validity in shaping an alternative paradigm to the prevailing model of neoliberal productivism, even if the peasant terminology may jar. His view is that multi-product farms emerge offering competitiveness and also more autonomy. For example, diversified output is combined with on-farm processing and the construction of new short links to consumers. This process might be combined with a shift away from main input markets towards farming more economically, and using less chemicals, say, offering the opportunity to reground farming upon the resources of nature and not those of agro-industry. Reconnecting the farm to the local economy offers opportunities for household pluriactivity and new forms of local cooperation. Such a process allows for the de-linking of agriculture from direct dependency upon financial and industrial capital and offers an escape from the treadmill of financialisation (Burch and Lawrence 2009). Given the precarious situation of the Irish banks and the normally significant demand for credit required by entrepreneurial farmers engaging in constant rounds of investment, this option might be amongst the most strategically astute. Finally, van der Ploeg speaks of the recovery of craftsmanship, this unity of mental and manual labour that allows for direct and skilful control over the process of production.

While the overwhelming majority of agricultural commentators here will dismiss such mechanisms for being radically at variance with the belief that we can yet find a bonanza from selling grass-fed beef and processed milk into international markets, elsewhere there are striking examples of how many of van der Ploeg's mechanisms

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are taking root. In the United States there has been an extraordinary resurgence of civic agriculture, 'agriculture of the middle', community-supported agriculture (CSAs) and so on (DeLind 2002, Lyson 2004, DuPuis and Gillion 2010). In Europe, particularly in the South, farmers are responding to the desire of many people to conserve and protect particular speciality foods, animal breeds and precious habitats (Brunori and Rossi 2000, Parrott *et al.* 2002, Barham 2003). Here are cases where, often with the support of local communities, farms are working to extricate themselves from the technological and financial treadmill and return to the principles of producing wholesome primary foods (Marsden and Smith 2005). While one cannot underestimate the challenge that such a strategic change presents for farmers, such developments will also require utterly new networks of people willing to engage and support these efforts and thereby contribute to the shortening of food supply chains (see below). It will also require a sea-change in the mind-set of government that frequently appears in thrall to Big Science and which together, in common pursuit of the Knowledge Economy, have come to view food as a nutrient-delivery system capable of achieving public acceptance of probiotics, nano-tech, and nutri-genomics (Scrinis and Lyons 2007, Dixon 2009).

In recent years geographers have made a very substantial contribution to understanding the 'turn to quality' and the rise of alternative food networks documenting a range of novel practices in production, distribution and retailing of food products (Renting *et al.* 2003, Sage 2003, Watts *et al.* 2005, Ilbery and Maye 2006, Morgan *et al.* 2006, Maye *et al.* 2007). Such work has highlighted in particular the interest of food consumers in searching out and supporting efforts at relocalisation, building relations of proximity through short food supply chains, and thereby facilitating the recovery of trust following a succession of food safety scares. Together with the rise of demand for fairly traded produce, the mainstreaming of animal welfare considerations, and of organic and speciality food, there is evidence to suggest a turn towards more critical and ethical consumption (Goodman 2010, Goodman *et al.* 2010), embracing a new responsibility in the journey from value-for-money bargains to values-for-money choices (Lang forthcoming).

However, there are a number of fast moving initiatives that go beyond 'moral consumerism' and are evidence for more collective engagement where groups display a new civic responsibility to shape a more sustainable future (Little *et al.* forthcoming, Miele and Evans 2010, Sherriff 2009). Ireland alone bears witness to this: claiming the site of conception, if not the birth, of the Transition Movement and host to many of its towns; the source of the 'Grow it Yourself' campaign that has spread virally across the country and which is helping with the proliferation of localised food growing initiatives such as community gardens and allotments; and support for a robust network of farmers' markets, country markets and other local retail initiatives. Although highly heterogeneous, such developments are evidence for emerging sets of social movements around food that not only reflect current events in Ireland but will come to shape the future of Irish foodscapes.

The papers

The papers that follow are substantially revised versions of presentations made at a panel, 'Evaluating the Irish Foodscape' as part of the Conference of Irish Geographers in 2009. The first of these papers, by Linda Coakley, utilises the

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notion of foodscape in relation to the growing visible presence of Polish food shops in Irish towns and cities since 2004. Her paper seeks to understand the role that these shops fulfil for those Polish and other East European migrants attracted to Ireland's booming labour market in the mid-2000s. Using a 'more-than-representational' approach, Coakley not only interrogates the everyday practices of shopping, cooking and eating food, but seeks to engage with the very materiality of foodstuffs. Here, we begin to understand how obtaining the ingredients necessary to execute an authentic rendering of a Polish dish become critical to the continuity of everyday life. Although the financial crisis has led many Poles to return home resulting in fewer shops, those that remain contribute to the maintenance of a cosmopolitan Irish foodscape.

The regard of domestic cooks for such vital ingredients as real Polish breadcrumbs necessarily invites us to reflect upon Irish cuisine and to ask whether there might be a comparable level of commitment to certain dishes. This is, of course, a complex and controversial question, for it is not at all clear that we have a comprehensive and detailed picture of traditional Irish foodways (Sexton 1998). The staples of the early Irish diet were cereals – probably by order of importance oats, barley, wheat and rye – and dairy produce: sour milk, curds, soft cheese and butter (Davidson 2006). For coastal communities such as on the Iveragh Peninsula, fish and shellfish would have provided a valuable source of food (Sage and Small 2009). But overlaying these native foods is the complex history of conquest and colonisation that in time imposed a critical role on Ireland in victualling the British Navy and overseas dominions. Across Munster butter roads and droving routes all led to Cork which, by the mid-eighteenth century was annually exporting tens of thousands of barrels of salted beef, bacon and butter to England, Europe and the Americas (Sage and Sexton 2005). It is in this context that Ireland's relationship with the potato must be placed, for this tuber was able to produce a higher output of nutrition per acre than grain, and came to substitute for dairy produce and oats which were then sold to meet rents (Feehan 2003).

In her paper, Alice D'Arcy traces the introduction, expansion and collapse of potato production that resulted in the Great Famine. Although the area of cultivation recovered to some extent by the 1860s, it has been in continuous decline ever since and production today is highly mechanised and regionally concentrated. D'Arcy is particularly interested in exploring the ecological dimensions of the contemporary high-input, high-output potato farming system, using Life Cycle Assessment methods to address the multiple impacts on environment. This is a far cry from the days when potato was a subsistence crop; today it is just another commodity that ties producers, upstream, into suppliers of agri-inputs, and downstream into food retailers. Yet, fortunately, the potato retains an important role in the Irish diet and there remains a cultural preference for floury varieties that are only largely met by domestic production. Perhaps the uniquely branded 'Irish' potato or its many varieties could become a symbolic and powerful tool to shorten food supply chains within Ireland?

Relocalising food has certainly become a popular call, and in their paper Ricketts Hein and Watts develop and apply an index of food relocalisation to the Republic of Ireland and Britain. They note some of the difficulties that arise in relation to the term 'local', difficulties that extend beyond the community of 'locavores' deciding whether one should eat within a 50-mile, 100-mile or greater catchment ('foodshed') radius (Kloppenburg *et al.* 1996; see also Feagan 2007). Yet by drawing upon a range

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of appropriate sources Ricketts Hein and Watts come up with a pragmatic and robust index which they apply to each county in the four jurisdictions. Devising such a comparative tool as this is both novel and valuable for it offers genuine insights into the relative performance of different regions and might encourage relevant agencies to learn from experiences elsewhere.

If local is a contested term, so is the very idea of 'alternative' food networks in relation to the mainstream. Binary opposition has a seductive simplicity (the local versus the global, slow versus fast food, 'food from somewhere' versus 'food from nowhere' (Campbell 2009)), but can be seriously misleading (see Holloway *et al.* 2007; see also Morgan forthcoming). Although critical consumers have helped to support an active network of farmers' markets around the country, the corporate-controlled food system not only remains standing but is more powerful and extensive than ever. Not only has it engaged in horizontal diversification into a wide range of consumer services (personal finance, telecommunications, on-line shopping and home delivery), it is actively engaged in market deepening through an extended range of organic, speciality, ethnic and fairly-traded goods and is even taking a lead on sustainability (e.g. carbon labelling). The 'alternative' and the mainstream are no longer polar opposites but co-exist within a zone of discursive and material transgression being reshaped by a new politics of consumption (see Goodman and Sage forthcoming).

It is in this context that Aisling Murtagh utilises a social movement perspective, in order to investigate the potential of selected food communities to present genuinely oppositional alternative spaces. She is interested in exploring how personalised resistance might become the basis of collective response for wider social change. A social movement approach has been successfully used by Hilary Tovey in her examination of the Irish organic movement in particular (Tovey 1997, 2002, 2006). Murtagh, however, draws upon two case studies of pioneering food communities in Dublin, and concludes that current alternative food activity may be the seeds of social change that is supporting slow but continuous and incremental erosion of the prevailing agri-food edifice. Clearly many of the collective initiatives noted above (the spread of food growing across the country, the 'unleashing' of transition towns, even the opening of Cloughjordan eco-village in County Tipperary) offer evidence of efforts to practically create a more integrated, localised and sustainable way of producing and consuming food. Yet there will be challenges, with the likelihood of moments of marked contestation when the prevailing edifice imposes its rules and standards. Whether it is cheese makers challenging the tyranny of a bureaucratic hyper-hygienism (Sage 2007a and Sage forthcoming) or stallholders contesting the extinguishing of long-established market rights (Sage 2007b), it will be important for the emerging social movement to demonstrate its commitment to a genuinely alternative food imaginary in Ireland. And in this process, of critically examining and reshaping the Irish foodscape, geographers have an important contribution to make.

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Note

1. The lyrics include the following lines:
   'I don't have a time for a fancy breakfast or put muesli in a bowl
   I just head to the Statoil garage for the jumbo breakfast roll'
   And the chorus,
   'Two eggs two rasher two sausage two bacon two puddings one black one white
   All placed like a tower on top of each other and then wrapped up good and tight'

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