

Constraint and autonomy in the Swiss “local contract farming” movement

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ABSTRACT:

Local contract farming (LCF) – the Swiss version of CSA-like food ventures - has a long history in Switzerland. Pioneers formed their first cooperatives in the 1970s. After a long period of marginality, the movement took off during the last decade, with local ventures springing up in all parts of the country. Based on an ethnography of three case studies in the French-speaking part of Switzerland, our paper starts from the observable effects of those ventures for their members, both producers and consumers. A first critical look at LCF ventures can easily identify some of its limitations and contradictions (including class effects and the limited impact on overall consumption/production by members), which troubles any idealistic representations of these ventures. Such disruptions are already well identified in the literature on alternative food movements. However, these ventures and the hope for changing unsustainable and unfair food systems they carry cannot be reduced to their limitations only. We propose to take seriously the “promise of difference” (Le Velly, 2017) offered by LCF. In other words, our approach implies first to recognize their intention – to create what they see as better food systems – without assuming that their operating methods should be radically different from mainstream food systems, and then to examine the concrete changes brought about by ventures connected to LCF. This translates into two broad questions. First, how is this promise embodied in a variety of experiences within specific reorganizations of the producer-consumer relationship, in French-speaking Switzerland? And second, what are its effects on the practices and the subjectivities – i.e. how people see themselves and their capacity to act – of the actors participating in those experiences? Drawing on an ethnography of three examples of LCF networks, we focus on two elements that constitute essential vehicles for the rearrangements that we have observed: the contract that translates and formalizes the promise by reinforcing the producers’ autonomy from market-based dependencies, through a long-term commitment on the part of the consumers; and the food, whose quality and value are redefined and that acts as a mediator in the redefinition of the producer-consumer relationship. By means of these empirical investigations we attempt to move beyond the debate about whether these networks are truly alternative or not, in order to look at these ventures as particular collections of human and non-human actors that “open up spaces in which to enact a politics of possibility” (Harris 2009: 58). We will pay particular attention to the process of autonomisation, as a form of empowerment, that is brought about by participation in LCF. By acknowledging both the potential for transformation of LCF ventures and their clear limitations, this chapter aims to nurture academic and public discussions that develop beyond statements of success or failure, where limitations and imperfections do not make hope of positive transformation of food systems impossible.

In the Swiss context, local contract farming (LCF)¹ refers to collectives in the form of associations of producers and consumers connected by a long-term contract and by their shared goal of supporting both local agriculture that respects the environment and fair pay for the farmers². In this system, the consumers, by paying a subscription fee, commit to supporting the production of the growers. In return, they receive, either monthly or weekly, a “basket” of food products whose quantity, quality, and price have been established in advance. These collectives of producers and consumers, which are part of the legacy of the pioneering experiences of the 1970s and 1980s (the *Jardins de Cocagne* in Geneva and the *Clef des Champs* in the Jura region) that were driven by a concern for the environment and a desire to challenge consumerist society, have enjoyed a revival since the 2000s. Food scandals, health concerns, the deregulation of the agricultural market, and the mainstreaming and industrialization of organic food have all contributed to a (renewed) appreciation for local supply chains, which are perceived as being safer, more ecologically sound, and in the spirit of greater solidarity. Thus, the number of LCF ventures has exploded in recent years in French-speaking Switzerland, growing from 13 in 2003 (Porcher 2010) to 28 in 2016, with a total membership of approximately 6300. Furthermore, according to the 2016 URGENCI report (Volz et al. 2016), 60 such ventures have been counted in Switzerland as a whole. In a sign of the growing institutionalization of such collectives, a Federation of French-speaking Swiss Local Contract Farming (*Fédération Romande d’Agriculture contractuelle de proximité, FRACP*) was formed in 2007. Their organizational models have also begun to diversify: alongside the traditional model of the first ventures, which directly integrate production into a cooperative or associational structure, another model has developed, of the association as an intermediary, linking consumers to producers who are not employed by the LCF but who remain legally and economically autonomous.³ Thus, LCF systems can no longer be seen as a marginal phenomenon in Switzerland. Not only that, but all over the world, similar arrangements, though under a variety of names and with important differences in emphasis, are multiplying and networking with each other: whether it is the Associations to Support Small-Scale Farming (AMAP) in France, Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) in the United States and Canada, Solidarity Agriculture (Solawi) in Germany, or the *teikei* system in Japan. Through their existence and actions, these solidarity purchasing initiatives have become the contemporary face and symbol of healthy consumption that respects both ecosystems and food producers.

If these food networks are the embodiment of new forms of agri-food utopias, then, they are not utopias in the sense of a nonexistent “elsewhere” but rather in the form of a set of discourses, intentions, and concrete experimentations (Stock, Carolan & Rosin, 2015). Their utopian dimension can be found in the “promise of difference” that they express, in other words the “promise of a different way of organizing food production, trade, and/or consumption and the promise of the benefits associated with that” (Le Velly 2017: 24). In other words, by transforming the relations and interactions between producers and consumers and developing new visions about them, these food networks hope to create better – understood as fairer and greener – food systems

¹ The term “local contract farming” was formalized and brought into widespread use by the establishment of the Federation of French-speaking Swiss Local Contract Farming in 2007. The federation created a charter to define this system and the basic principles shared by the various ventures that were already in existence and already very diverse.

² As detailed in the paper, LCF initiatives can take many forms and food producers are not always “farmers” with a proper farm. In some instances, the food producers are gardeners, employed by the LCF initiatives. IN this paper however, we use “farmer” as a general term to speak of the people professionally active in agricultural production. This use of the term is also consistent with the use by LCF members.

³ This research took place in the context of the Swiss National Science Foundation’s research project on “Healthy food and sustainable food production in Switzerland” (PNR 69).

In this chapter, we propose to take this promise seriously, in other words to “recognize the intention without assuming that the operating methods are radically different” (Le Velly, 2017: 24) and to examine the concrete changes brought about by ventures connected to LCF. Starting with the case of Switzerland, we will attempt to answer two large questions. First, how is this promise embodied in a variety of experiences in French-speaking Switzerland and within specific reorganizations of the producer-consumer relationship? And second, what are its effects on the practices of production and consumption and on the subjectivities of the actors participating in those experiences? We will focus on two elements that constitute essential vehicles for the rearrangements that we have observed: the contract that ties members to the initiative and the food itself. The contract translates and formalizes the promise of a better food system by reinforcing the producers’ autonomy through a long-term commitment on the part of the consumers. The food, whose quality and value are redefined, acts as a mediator in the redefinition of the producer-consumer relationship. By means of these empirical investigations we will attempt to move beyond the debate about whether these networks are truly alternative or not, in order to look at these ventures as particular collections of human and non-human actors that “open up spaces in which to enact a politics of possibility” (Harris 2009: 58). We will pay particular attention to the process of empowerment for the members – producers and consumers – that is brought about by participation in LCF.

Like Le Velly (2017), we believe that an examination of the transformations brought about by LCF must remain central to the analysis, but also that we need to leave behind a framework that sees these changes only in terms of an “alternative” model to conventional agriculture or, on the other hand, as a simple “niche market” that can then be absorbed into conventional agriculture. We take as our starting point the observation that LCF is not positioned “against” or “outside of” the dominant agri-food systems but that it maintains, instead, a dialectical relationship of differentiation and integration with respect to those dominant systems. The vision of an alternative model that is completely outside the industrialized and globalized agri-food system, just like the vision of a neoliberal economic model that could absorb and neutralize all subversive ventures, cannot withstand empirical analysis (Forney & Haerberli, 2017; Chiffolleau & al., 2019; Maticena & Corvo, 2020). Such a vision does not allow us to grasp the multiplicity of moralities, institutional arrangements, and economic rationales that are threaded through contemporary agri-food systems and, more broadly, all the various institutions of the market economy. Thus, while recognizing how these so-called alternative networks are in fact woven into the globalized capitalist economy, we will make the interpretive choice of “reading for difference rather than dominance” (Gibson-Graham, 2008). From this perspective, it seems relevant to refer to the literature on the concepts of autonomy and empowerment in the agricultural and food systems. These concepts, which are central to the literature on family farming (Mooney 1988; Stock et Forney 2014), on small-farm movements (van der Ploeg 2008), on food sovereignty movements (Trauger, 2015), and on cooperative practices in agriculture (Stock et al. 2014; Lucas & Gasselin 2018), are largely absent, surprisingly, from the literature on CSA and similar initiatives, despite an, arguably, shared objective of getting free from some of the dependencies related to the dominant food system. Wilson (2013), inspired by the work of Gibson-Graham (2006) and Chatterton (2005), is an exception, proposing the concept of “autonomous food spaces.” In this approach, autonomy is understood both as a process of self-assertion (subjectivity) and, at the same time, as a process of reorganization of social, economic, and political relations, the outcome of which is always partial and uncertain. Another discussion around notions of autonomy and autonomisation processes contrasts individualistic with collective understandings of autonomy. Stock et al. (2014) deconstructs neoliberal assumptions of autonomy as individual freedom, emphasizing

the collective autonomisation processes through cooperation. In a similar vein, Emery (2015) analysis how individualistic representations of independency have been ideologically imposed on English agriculture, at the expense of collective engagements that would have resulted in “actual independence”. These discussions on “autonomous food spaces” and collective processes of autonomisation seemed to us to be particularly pertinent as we analyzed our data. We will see, in fact, how they allow us to conceive of these ventures simultaneously as an attempt to build agri-food systems that can at least partially liberate their participants from the constraints of the dominant organization of the market and, at the same time, as a way to promote critical reflection and a willingness to engage in transformation in their members.

The varying models and trajectories of three ventures

Our study is based on a sustained ethnographic study of three associations over the course of almost four years (2012 to 2016), including an analysis of their official documentation and field notes from participant observation at their meetings, work in the fields, or the distribution of vegetable baskets; 20 semi-directed interviews with committee members, producers, and consumers; and, finally, a longitudinal study of 15 consumers over the course of 18 to 24 months including an initial interview, a self-evaluation by way of a food budget, and a final interview based on the completed budget. This diversity of data has been analyzed as single corpus of ethnographic material. The coding has been inductive, following the principles of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2006) to create analytical categories from the ethnographic material itself. All the interviews and observations were conducted in French. The quotes reproduced in this chapter have been translated into English by the authors.

In this section, we present our three case studies with the intention of showing the variety of histories, commitments, and trajectories that are included in local contract farming in French-speaking Switzerland and the promise of difference that it embodies.

Rage de Vert: gardening to create connections and debate

“We wanted to change our lives and garden, just plain garden and feed people, it was a very simple thing.”⁴ This is how one of the two founders of this venture describes the beginnings of *Rage de Vert* (‘Fury for Green’). He and his co-founder had to start from scratch, throwing themselves into organic market gardening after a brief experience on a farm in the region. Our interviewee is a biologist by training and his teammate a photographer; together, they enlisted their friends and acquaintances to found the *Rage de Vert* association. In the tradition of the pioneering experiences of the 1970s and 1980s, they embodied the paradigm of the new farmer who takes up farming with no direct family connections to farming nor any training in the field to begin with (Rouvière 2015). Faced with the challenge of finding land to cultivate, *Rage de Vert* was able to begin its work in 2010 when the city of Neuchâtel provided it with urban brownfields (abandoned post-industrial land). In 2011, the association delivered its first baskets to about a hundred members. The basics of the operation were already in place at that point: it was heavily urban; it relied on volunteer work by its members; the weekly distribution allowed for a moment of connection between the gardeners and the members; and collaborations with other actors began to take place, making it possible to obtain an additional plot on which to plant winter vegetables. After its hesitant beginnings, *Rage de Vert* became increasingly

⁴ Interview with T., founder of *Rage de Vert*, Neuchâtel, April 24, 2014. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotations in this paragraph are also from this interview.

professionalized: the committee took a stronger role and, beginning in 2015, the system was improved with the introduction of online tools for managing members, deliveries, and volunteer work. In 2014, the hiring of a new gardener also made it possible to develop educational activities, with the introduction of specific modules for schools. In this consolidation, the number of members grew from approximately 100 in 2011 to almost 180 in 2017, following some serious promotional activity. Since its inception, *Rage de Vert* had always faced some uncertainty about the land on which it farmed, given that the two borrowed plots could be taken back from one year to the next. In 2015, the association learned that one of the plots was going to be developed and that they urgently needed to find an alternative. They found some garden market plots that they were able to rent long-term from a foundation involved in socio-vocational integration. In 2016, after a lively debate, the committee voted in favor of the move: the new plots were more than ten kilometers from the city, which called into question the organization of educational activities and the urban nature of the venture.

The potential for “difference” and transformation towards more sustainability expressed by *Rage de Vert* is rooted in what it calls inclusive production that is respectful of the environment and that also seeks to promote the use of urban brownfields, “soft mobility” (non-motorized transport), and social bonds. Although it was not entirely able to maintain its urban dimension, the association continues to cultivate its social ties with a variety of audiences (in particular, in the context of its participation in programs to integrate asylum seekers or the long-term unemployed). The gardeners are also in contact with the consumer members every week when the baskets are distributed, as well as during farm work, in which the consumers are required to participate for two half days every year.

Les Jardins d’Ouchy: supporting farms on a human scale

In 2007, in Lausanne, the association *Les Jardins du Flon* was launched; the first baskets were delivered at the end of the summer. Supported by leftist politicians, this venture was started by urban consumers who allied themselves with three regional producers. Soon, *Les Jardins du Flon* was fully subscribed, and due to strong demand from consumers, a second association was founded in another district of Lausanne: *Les Jardins d’Ouchy*. Taking up the model of *Les Jardins du Flon*, which it adapted, *Les Jardins d’Ouchy* was based above all on the principles of support for family farming and proximity between producers and consumers. Production followed the norms of integrated production established by the federal agricultural policy of Required Ecological Services (*Prestations Ecologiques Requises*, PER),⁵ but it was not required to follow the norms of the “bio suisse” label. *Les Jardins d’Ouchy*’s two farmers are based in the greater Lausanne area. Only a portion of their vegetable production goes to the LCF baskets; they are involved in other farming ventures (notably fruit production for wholesalers) and have other sales outlets, particularly for mass retail. Starting with the first delivery, in September of 2009, the system was established very simply: the two farmers coordinate production and delivery and define the contents of the baskets. They take turns being present for the distribution, which takes place every Thursday in a house in the neighborhood.

Les Jardins d’Ouchy grew very quickly, starting with an initial membership of almost 140 households and reaching almost 200 after a year and a half. Beginning in 2013, its membership shrunk, with the number reaching about 170 in 2017. One of the primary concerns of the coordinator is to get the consumer members to participate in the association’s activities beyond

⁵ The PER norms represent the environmental standard set by federal agricultural policy, which is the condition for access to the direct payment system.

simply paying their annual subscription fee. Although their active participation is limited, supporting “local farmers” emerges as a key motivation for the consumers. In its vision statement, the association also emphasizes its desire to “preserve the farming profession by making it possible to maintain human-scale farms.” This echoes the political and unionist dynamic that continues to be strongly present in official speeches by the founders of *Les Jardins d’Ouchy*. The issues of preserving the environment or promoting farming that is 100% organic, or raising the awareness of a broader public on these issues, along with creating a sense of belonging to a collective, appear to be secondary here.

Notre Panier Bio: promoting organic production and food sovereignty

Organic and certified above all is the watchword for the farmers of *Notre Panier Bio* (Our Organic Basket) in the canton of Fribourg. The group that is behind this venture, which was created at the end of 2006, had its origins in the association of organic farmers of Fribourg and interested consumers and was directed by an agricultural engineer who became the secretary of the group. An organic market gardener also played a key role, in particular by taking care of the group’s logistics and administration, from the very beginning, through his own business. The first baskets were delivered at the beginning of 2007, with 11 associated producers and about fifty members. The distinguishing feature of *Notre Panier Bio* is to offer baskets at a variety of distribution points (about forty of them in 2017) around the canton, but also to bring together a large number of producers, 24 in 2017. As the current coordinator puts it, “We want to make organic food accessible to a large number, to people who do not have access to organic grocery stores or to markets, and at the same time, we offer small producers a chance to become widely known, which they would not otherwise have.”⁶ This model, which includes the delivery of monthly baskets and a large variety of products (including processed food, dairy, grains, and meat), complements the direct sales that the vast majority of the producers practice in addition. Thus, none of the producers sells the majority of their production through *Notre Panier Bio*. The value of the network of producers involved has made it possible for the association to grow rapidly, from 400 members a year after it was founded to almost 640 households in 2018. However, this number has decreased again in the following years. In December 2021, there were only 427 contracts signed with consumer-members⁷. Indeed, the association still has important work to do in building the relationship between its producers and its members, a relationship which at this point is still more imaginary than it is embodied in any physical encounters. This situation is due to the distribution structure that does not bring together producers and consumers, and, probably, to the relatively large size of the association which dilutes interpersonal relationships. The association is also constantly working to produce the “quality” of its products, which it defines in terms of ecological and taste criteria. Thus, the promise of difference expressed by *Notre Panier Bio* lies in its offering of organic products, which is an argument that is constantly emphasized in this group. But the aspects of solidarity with Swiss producers and of food sovereignty are also present, as evidenced by an extract of the group’s charter: “With solidarity and fairness, the contractual system reinforces the independence of the farms and promotes direct sales and consumption.”

⁶ From a discussion with M., the coordinator of *Notre Panier Bio*, following a committee meeting, June 6, 2014, Grangeneuve.

⁷ This decrease in members is probably related to the development of several other LCF initiatives in the same geographical area. Arguably, this boom created some sort of competition between initiatives. However, on the basis of our data we cannot confirm neither contradict this hypothesis.

The diversification of commitments; interdependencies

Our three case studies belong to the “second wave” of producer-consumer collectives that began to appear in the early 2000s, in the context of a new appreciation for short supply chains against the backdrop of health, social, and ecological crises. They attest to the growing multiplicity and diversity of models and kinds of commitment to be found in these collectives.

Compared to the traditional model of a production unit that is directly embedded within a cooperative or associative structure (exemplified here by *Rage de Vert*) we note the diversification – confirmed among the members of the regional federation, the FRACP – into models where the association is an intermediary (see *Les Jardins d’Ouchy*, *Notre Panier Bio*). In these new models, the approach appears to be a more pragmatic one than what we see among the pioneers of the movement, although the critique of the industrial agri-food model remains the same. This pragmatism is characterized by a high degree of intertwinement with more conventional sectors, in particular for *Notre Panier Bio* and *Les Jardins d’Ouchy*. In both cases, the producers are involved in a variety of sectors, ranging from direct sales to delivery to wholesalers and collaboration with the dominant players in mass retail. The producers only deliver a small part of their production to the LCF groups, though they receive a great deal of recognition for it. Thus, there is a high degree of “hybridization” (Filippini & al., 2016) between the so-called conventional sectors and the so-called alternative ones. The consumer members, similarly, practice multimodal provisioning, of which mass retail remains an integral part while LCF only provides a modest portion of their food. This is true for *Rage de Vert* as well. These findings show that the boundaries between the so-called alternative and conventional spheres are largely permeable, and that the former continue to be at least partially dependent on the latter. This statement echoes findings in diverse economies” research (Wilson, 2013; Forney & Häberli, 2017; Blumberg & al., 2020), inspired by the seminal work by Gibson-Graham (1996). In their perspectives, looking for the “cracks” in the capitalist hegemony allows researchers to overcome the capitalocentric framing at the basis of the binary alternative-conventional. It encourages us to switch the focus from food “alternatives” to food “diversity” (Cameron & Wright, 2014: 2). By nuancing the domination of capitalist logics, highlighting the possibility of diverse economic models, and nuancing the dichotomy between alternative and conventional, such approaches reintroduce room for hope, without having to naively ignore the troubles that initiatives in the like of LCF encounter in their enactment of different values in food systems.

One last observation that follows from our three case studies is the relatively homogeneous sociological profile of the consumer members. While the LCF models have multiplied and diversified over time, they have still not managed to achieve diversity in their membership, which is comprised mostly of people with an above-average education level (though not necessarily above-average income). Thus, at *Rage de Vert*, almost 80% of the membership has a tertiary education (university or higher education), whereas for the Swiss population as a whole that percentage was 41% in 2016 (Swiss Federal Statistical Office 2017). In terms of age, they are mostly in their thirties (54% are between 30 and 39 years old), and the income of the member households matches the national average. The members of *Notre Panier Bio* present a similar profile. In addition, the initiators and some of the committee members of the three ventures also share a relatively similar socio-demographic profile. This finding corroborates what has been observed in other countries (Paranthoën 2013, Jaffe & Gertler, 2006), suggesting that these collectives are, at present, primarily a “class” phenomenon (Brusadelli & al, 2016).

Table 1. Comparison of the three case studies⁸

	<i>Rage de Vert</i>	<i>Notre Panier Bio</i>	<i>Les Jardins d'Ouchy</i>
Mode of organisation	Non-profit association ⁹	Non-profit association	Non-profit association
Starting year	2010	2006	2009
Producers	4 “gardeners” employed by the association (part-time)	24 organic farmers, all independent businesses	2 main farmers, 4 occasional farmers, all independent businesses
Number of members	180	640	170
Products	Vegetables	Vegetables, fruits, legumes, dairy, cereal, eggs, meat	Vegetables, fruits
Standard	Organic (Bio Suisse)	Organic (Bio Suisse)	Conventional (Swiss federal standard)

At the core, the contract and a long-term commitment by consumers

Beyond the diversity of institutional models followed by the second-wave LCF systems, all of them define and create the producer-consumer relationship by means of a long-term contract, which commits the consumer to one or more producers for at least a year. In LCF, the contract is an important tool to steer and enact the collaboration between producers and consumers according to the values promoted by the initiatives.

The contract defines the terms of the engagement according to specific characteristics that diverge from the most common forms of food provisioning. These are generally:

- a long-term commitment by the consumers, for 12 months in the cases studied here, with a prepayment of the annual amount of the transaction.
- following certain (more or less strict) environmental production norms and fair pay for the producers.
- a collective negotiation of prices, proposed by the producers and then agreed on at the general meetings.
- an obligation on the part of both the producers and the consumers to become members of the association and to pay a membership fee.
- and finally, in some cases, participation by the consumers in the agricultural work for a few days per year (sweat equity) (as in the case of *Rage de Vert*, where the consumer members have to contribute two half days of volunteer work per year).

At first glance, the contract would appear to clearly favor the empowerment of the producers. Indeed, the producers do gain economic security, by receiving prices that they consider fair and by sharing a certain amount of risk with the consumers. In addition, the length of the commitment allows the farmers to make a specific plan for their crops and harvests over the course of a season, and the prepayment gives them a certain level of security, both for their

⁸ The data in the table reflect the situation as in 2018.

⁹ According to article 60 of the Swiss Civil Code.

initial investments and also in the face of weather-related and other risks that might affect production.

Thus, the LCF system facilitates the startup of a farming operation for new farmers by guaranteeing them a minimum sale for their production, while for farmers who are already established it allows them to diversify their outlets and to become at least partially independent of the large retail chains. In addition, our interviews make it clear that through their participation in LCF the producers receive renewed appreciation for their profession and a greater recognition of its arduousness and socioeconomic challenges. The importance of recognition is explicit in the work of this farmer:

“If we didn’t have the dialogue with the members when we participate to the distribution [of the baskets], it wouldn’t be worth the trouble. You know, they ask you questions that looks a bit basic. But this is so important to provide answers and explain what we do, how we do it. Then, they say thank you for having given something to them. That’s really what motivated me when I say to myself that there a lot of work in preparing all this market [i.e. the site of distribution] and coming here, to town.” (C., producer for Jardins d’Ouchy, 12.06 2016, Lausanne)

Other types of direct interaction with consumers, for instance at the farmer market, can also attract the same compliments on products and related pride. However, the contract creates a stronger feeling of belonging to a collective. In addition, these networks also offer the potential for greater political commitment on behalf of small farming, which the producers very much appreciate. And finally, the fact that the consumers appreciate and comment on the quality of their products gives the farmers great satisfaction. In our interviews, the contacts with the consumers, even if they are only intermittent, are a fundamental element of the farmers’ motivation for participating.

At the same time, however, this connection with the consumers and the participation in LCF also involve new obligations for the producers, such as delivery and distribution, as well as participating in an associational structure that entails the development of new skills in association management, volunteer management, the organization of events and farm visits, etc. All of this takes time and commitment, which can weigh on the producers in the long term, especially producers for whom LCF is not the only marketing channel.

The advantages of the contract in terms of providing support for the producers, mentioned above, are made possible, in part, by the transfer of certain constraints to the consumers. For the consumer, belonging to an LCF association means giving up, at least in part and mostly for vegetables, the greater freedom of choice and price that they enjoy in the context of mass retail shopping. This kind of long-term commitment, connected with prepayment for the goods they receive, involves a certain economic effort. In addition, the contents of the basket the consumers receive is predefined and imposed on them: the consumer has to adapt to the offerings of one or a few producers, which then vary according to the season, the weather conditions, or other hazards. The rhythms of delivery, whether weekly or monthly, as well as the quantity are also settled in advance, and collectively, by the contract.

And yet, the consumer members that we interviewed actually most often put a positive value on these constraints: they were presented as being both chosen and embraced, even valued. While the consumers do have to give up a certain form of individual liberty, they say that they do that in order to better fulfill their commitment to patterns of consumption that are directed,

above all, towards a desire to preserve the environment, to support Swiss farmers, or towards a quest for products that are healthy or that present new tastes. These two quotes illustrates the diverse valuations, if not of the constraints themselves, of their effects :

“One thing I did not mention and that’s very important... it’s the solidarity with farmers in prices. It’s sharing risks and chances they have regarding weather... and all the hazards of nature. And this, I find really beautiful to pass on to our children. Myself too. It makes me feel better.” (with S., member of Jardin d’Ouchy, January 6, 2016, Lausanne)

“Well, I discovered that in winter it’s all roots. I discovered veggies that I had never cooked before, tastes that I never cooked before. So, that was interesting to find veggies that I didn’t know and that I would never have bought myself.”(F., member of Notre Panier Bio, May 5, 2015, Marly)

The contract, thus, allows them to reaffirm these choices and, above all, to uphold them over time, without having to repeat the effort of (re-)commitment with every act of consumption. Given the complexity of the stakes for sustainability that are involved in the question of food, binding together transportation, agricultural production methods, transformation and conservation, and north-south relations, the act of consumption requires a whole series of translations and processes of delegating choice. To commit to an LCF group, then, is to make a choice, for a relatively long period of time, to radically delegate these negotiations to a small local collective. As certain members explain it, this simplifies the commitment:

In the baskets, there is what there is, that’s it, period. It puts us a little behind what our predecessors did: nature gives you what it gives you and you work with that, you limit your choices, you make do with what you have. (E., member of Rage de Vert, November 21, 2015, Neuchâtel)

However, it is also because these ventures are not in fact the only source for “food links” in which the consumers are involved that they promote an overall positive experience. In addition, some members do not honor their commitment over the long term. They end up feeling a certain weariness with the lack of diversity in the products on offer (especially in the winter) or with the lack of flexibility in the distribution methods. Thus, there is a turnover of 10% to 15% within each of the three ventures.

Food at the heart of the promise and transformation

LCF initiatives make a “promise of difference”, a promise to construct a way of producing, exchanging, and consuming food that avoids the failures of the dominant food system in terms of social and environmental sustainability. This promise has to do primarily with food itself, in its various qualities, which are simultaneously physical, nutritional, taste-related, and social. On the next level, the promise connects all of the social and environmental relations involved in the production, distribution, and consumption of food. We can hypothesize that if consumers—or in this case, more precisely, eaters—are willing to invest differently and to accept certain unaccustomed constraints, it is above all because of this plural nature of food, which crystallizes these various relationships between people, and with the natural elements that are part of the process of food production. Food stuff make these connections concrete and

tangible. The materiality of food contributes directly to making the consumers willing to develop personal investments in terms of economics (the price), time (for preparation and consumption), and the acquisition of new skills.

Becoming involved with an LCF collective also makes it possible to connect a certain critical approach towards consumption with the acquisition of new practical skills and knowledge about food, connected with the need to adapt to the rhythm of the seasons and sometimes to cook food items or varieties of vegetable with which one was previously unacquainted. This development is connected to the constraints that are built into LCF, such as limited choice and a certain monotony of the supply:

Yes, well I discovered that winter means root vegetables. I discovered vegetables that I had never cooked, tastes that I had never cooked, and so it was interesting to find vegetables that I didn't know, that I would not have bought. (F., member of Notre Panier Bio, May 8, 2015, Marly)

These skills and knowledge circulate and are shared within the collective that is made up of the producers, the consumers, and the association itself. As an example, the three ventures all provide their members with recipes or with information on food preservation. This is a way to support the consumers' learning process, their discovery of new tastes, a different aesthetic, or new information about how food is produced. This aspect is particularly appreciated for its educational value within the members' families:

What I liked about this setup was being able to show my kids, who were both small at the time, how food is grown. Because I myself don't have a house or a garden, and it seemed important to pass on this knowledge to them. So essentially, it was more for them, and for us, that was more secondary. (E., member of Rage de Vert, November 21, 2015, Neuchâtel)

At the heart of this knowledge is the food, which is much more than just an abstraction: every vegetable calls for its own questions, and the answers are always rooted in specific practices. This learning dynamic can also generate other, more political, forms of engagement. The collectives that we studied, for example, have mobilized to advocate for the inclusion of the concept of food sovereignty in Swiss law (Vuilleumier, 2017). This example shows that a political reflection that is incorporated into consumer practices on an individual level can shift, in certain cases, towards more classic and institutionalized forms of political mobilization and towards new expressions of "food activism" (Counihan & Siniscalchi, 2012).

Conclusion: moving towards empowerment through collective commitment

By rooting the relationships between producers and consumers in a long-term contract geared towards supporting human-scale farms and modes of production that seek to respect the environment and seasonality, LCF networks are raising anew the question of autonomy in the eating habits of their members. For the producer members, their involvement in the collective allows them to begin or to expand on a process of diversification and of emancipation from certain dependencies connected with how the dominant markets operate, in particular with respect to how prices are set and how product quality is defined. Of course, most of these aspects are negotiated within the associations, and the producer still has to submit to the collective's organizational principles. Nevertheless, the power relationships in the collective

are of an entirely different nature than they are in the mass retail market, and are much more favorable for the producers. The feeling of proximity and a fundamental willingness to support farmers lead to fairer relations. The empowerment of the producer is thus at the heart of the LCF project.

On the other hand, what the consumer members agree to could appear to represent a loss of autonomy in comparison with the dominant modes of consumption, at least if we reduce autonomy to the aspect of freedom of individual choice. This resonates with the abundance of products available in the wealthy Swiss retail sector. Consumers have certainly no individual control over the offer in supermarkets. However, the latter provide a huge diversity of products, notably in terms of quality, provenance, and price. Local organic products are sitting next to imported cheap food, allowing very diverse modes of consumptions within the boundaries of this assortment. Nevertheless, this individualistic conception of autonomy is contradicted both by the discourses and the practices connected with LCF. While these ventures seek to liberate themselves, at least to some degree, from the large retail chains, they do not do it by setting up an individualistic independence as its alternative. On the contrary, they establish forms of collective empowerment that take the path of forms of chosen interdependence within restricted collectives. In other words, LCF is reframing autonomy as interdependence. This approach towards autonomy sends us back to recent works on the processes of empowerment linked to cooperative practices in more traditional agricultural contexts (Stock & al, 2014; Emery, 2015; Forney & Häberli, 2016, 2017). These texts propose a definition of autonomy that includes collaboration and interdependence, within a relatively symmetric system of power relations. Thus, in their accounts, the consumer members of the LCF ventures emphasize benefits that we can characterize as a gain in autonomy when compared to the constraints imposed by the retail chains: a kind of consumption that is closer to the ideals of sustainability and solidarity that they seek, nourished by a critical and political reflection. Thus, paradoxically, it is the consensual renunciation of certain freedoms of consumer choice and the acceptance of strong interdependencies that produces a feeling of empowerment and autonomy. Admittedly, this renunciation is made easier by the structural context of abundance, which allows the actors to continue enjoying multimodal consumption elsewhere, and to leave an LCF venture at any time. Thus, we have seen that like other so-called ethical consumer practices (Lamine, 2008), LCF ventures only provide a modest portion of their food to consumers, whose provisioning continues to be enmeshed with the large retail chains; in addition, in two of our case studies, the producers also continue to be partially bound into the mass retail system to sell their goods. In addition, these ventures reveal clear limitations, in particular regarding their ability to reach a greater diversity of social classes and to generalize. Our results therefore confirm some of the limitations and troubles characterizing alternative food networks and that have been already described in the literature (e.g. Tregear 2011). Nevertheless, these important nuances do not invalidate the argument of empowerment. Participant to LCF initiative get some level of autonomisation, and are allowed to develop collectively a hopeful engagement for the transformation of food systems. The limitations and troubles met in the process only emphasize the partial nature of this empowerment, which is not built within a completely antagonistic relationship between two totalities—the alternative and the conventional—but rather in the intermingling and coevolution of a variety of economic practices, sometimes contradictory but always connected. Troubles and hope coexist in these attempts to create spaces of autonomy.

Alternative food networks have sometimes been critically described as relying on a neoliberal concept of governance, based on the individual responsibility of the consumer rather than public intervention (Guthman 2008). However, in fundamentally redefining the modalities of the act of consumption, particularly through long-term subscription and by restricting product choice,

the subject that is constructed by the LCF system departs from the principles of individualization and free choice that are generally associated with neoliberalism. Thus, the constitution of a collective around commitment to LCF itself creates new sites for a collective commitment, which have the distinctive feature of bringing producers and consumers together within a food association landscape that is very segmented.

Therefore, what is produced by participation in LCF ventures is a process of experimentation using concrete proposals oriented towards other potential food futures. Likewise, the LCF systems are part of maintaining, consolidating, and even developing diversified production and distribution channels while at the same time constituting potential sites of a broader mobilization and contestation of the agri-food industry. The LCF movement can thus be seen as a “food utopia,” in the words of Stock et al. (2015). Far from being a completed experience, it expresses an intention and experiments with new relationships to food and new ways of arranging the relationship between producers and consumers by constituting spaces of partial food empowerment. It embodies a “hope,” which admittedly only affects certain social groups, but which is nevertheless expanding globally, creating networks, and already affecting a large number of countries, well beyond Europe, North America, and Japan (Shi et al. 2011).

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