

Open air food markets around Montpellier: places for community building and re-localisation of urban food systems or just ordinary shopping places?

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Introduction

Open air food markets are a very common phenomenon in France. Every town used to have a farmers' market. With the rise of longer food chains, most of farmers' markets became open air food markets with many resellers and only few producers. In the context of a renewed public interest in local food production, however, do these markets remain just ordinary shopping places or do they play a new role in community building and re-localisation of urban food systems, as stated in North American and British literature on farmers' markets (Brown, 2002) and alternative food networks (Renting et al., 2003)?

The objective of the paper is to understand the dynamics of open air food markets within the urban shopping landscape of a medium size city in the South of France: Montpellier and especially to determine some factors of their emergence and growth or decline. It contributes to fill a gap identified in literature on farmers' markets (Machell & Caraher, 2012).

Moreover, the originality of our contribution is to focus not mainly on the city centre, but rather on periurban localities, where many farmers' markets disappeared in the 1970' with the motorized way of life and the rise of large-scale retail facilities. Which types of open air food markets can be distinguished? What are the role of urban public policies and community initiatives in the emergence or re-emergence of markets in periurban context? Are they places of reconnection between the city and the agriculture of its hinterland?

Methods

Whereas most studies on farmers' markets focus on the shoppers (Zepeda, 2009; Carey et al. 2011), we chose a territorial approach of the role of open air food markets in periurban context, a growing research question in geography (Delfosse & Navarro, 2011; Spilková et al., 2013).

The results are based on participant observation on the markets and interviews with sellers, mayors and technical staff of suburban municipalities and farmers' organisations.

The study area is the 31 municipalities of Montpellier metropolitan area plus 3 municipalities bordering Montpellier that do not belong to its political supra-municipal institution. Within these 34 municipalities, 11 open air food markets were localised in the city centre and 21 in the surrounding municipalities. Participant observation and quick interviews with sellers were conducted on these 21 periurban food markets. We gathered some basic characteristics of these markets: location, size (number of stalls), types and origin of the sellers, days of operation, and the range of goods offered. Then, qualitative analysis based on in-depth interviews was conducted on 6 markets selected because they offer a variety of dates of creation, social contexts and demographic sizes of towns or because we had identified in the first step of the research a public action supporting the market.

Results

Regarding the location of the 21 periurban markets, they greatly vary in size: the largest have about 90 stalls, while others comprise less than 10 or even 5 stalls. Half of the markets are less than 20 years old. The most recent markets (less than 5 years) are on the urban fringe: all the municipalities bordering Montpellier have a

market. This confirms the conclusion of Spilková et al. (2013) on the impact of the city structure represented by its centrality, population density, and public transport density on the markets. Beyond this urban fringe, all municipalities over 6000 inhabitants have a market, but also much smaller villages. The demographic size is thus not the only factor to explain the existence of a market. The historical context plays a big role.

Regarding now the role of public policies, new markets have been created by municipalities and more rarely by local NGOs. For elected representatives, the weekly open air food market is the best place to meet the inhabitants in an informal way during the elective campaign. Some municipalities support actively their market and try to attract more producers by offering them a free access to the market, by organising tastings of local products, or by offering land to farmers under the condition that they come weekly to the market. They want the market to foster social cohesion.

Regarding our hypothesis that food markets could contribute to the re-localisation of urban food systems, our first results does not show so many links between the markets and the agriculture of the hinterland. Except on very specific farmers' markets, most markets count only few producers, and some producers come from far away, 100 km for vegetable and fruits, even more for meat or cheese. The resellers buy their goods on the wholesale market. City dwellers looking for local products sometimes have difficulties to distinguish resellers from producers, and to know exactly the origin of the products that they buy. There is no other activity offered on the market (leisure, possibility to sit and eat/drink). Rather than places of community building, as on North American or British farmers' markets, periurban open air food markets are for many city dwellers just an ordinary shopping place.

Conclusions

This research confirms the on-going dynamic of open air food markets in French periurban shopping landscape. Around Montpellier, food markets emerged in municipalities of different social status and different political orientations, especially on the urban fringe. They structure the rural-urban linkages by catalyzing flows of food coming from the hinterland. Our maps contribute to define a potential food provisioning area for the city.

However, these open air food markets differ from farmers' markets identified in the literature by the small number of producers. Their role in re-localising the urban food system remains thus limited. In most localities, they seem to be nothing more than another shopping place.

Nevertheless, innovations emerge in some (mostly wealthy) suburban localities, where the municipality explicitly tries to attract farmers or/and consider the open air food market as a tool for deepening social cohesion and fostering community building.

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