## Marketplaces

## Movements, Representations and Practices

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# Chapter 12

# The role of mobility and transnationality for local marketplaces

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## 12 The role of mobility and transnationality for local marketplaces

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#### Introduction

I would say the market on the main square is an important local tradition, one can meet people, go shopping, have a coffee on the nearby terrace; many inhabitants of this city are quite attached to it.

(Interview with public officer, 28 November 2019)

Marketplaces have been described as flexible spatial and temporal assemblages that can contribute to inclusive public spaces (Schappo & Van Melik, 2017). Markets are seen as local events, which allow meaningful encounters between inhabitants (Watson, 2009). Similarly, fresh food markets and farmers' markets are often presented as places where local consumers buy directly from farmers (Alkon & McCullen, 2011).

This chapter explores how the local character of markets is produced by different market participants, such as customers, farmers/vendors and local authorities. We delve into the different meanings of 'local' to further understand how the local is performed and to demonstrate the consequences of vendors' (marketing) strategies, be they deliberate or unintentional. We show that the local is entwined with mobility and transnationality, both elements that are invisible in common representations. Furthermore, we argue that markets can be analysed as expressions of national forms of identification.

This chapter is based on ethnographic fieldwork on two fresh food markets in Switzerland as part of the research project *Moving Marketplaces: Following the Everyday Production of Inclusive Public Space*. Starting in December 2019 and taking place for seven months, the researchers participated in fresh food markets as observers, customers and vendors. During their working days on the markets, we followed vendors and visited some of them on their farms or their further selling points. In addition to participant observation, including many informal interviews with market actors such as vendors and customers, we conducted 13 in-depth interviews with six producing and three non-producing market vendors, two market managers and two city authorities. As part of the research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, and some markets were cancelled for several weeks, we adjusted our methods, and included phone interviews (MMP Team, 2020).

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The two cases we studied are located in two linguistic regions of Switzerland: a weekly fresh food market in the country's biggest city of Zurich, and a fresh food market taking place twice a week in the smaller town of Neuchâtel, which is close to the French border. Both markets are renowned for their qualitatively high offer of local food and cater to rather affluent customers. A peculiarity of Swiss markets is that food markets are strictly separated from non-food markets and that there are no market halls with permanent stalls. Instead, the municipalities assign particular places within the city for the markets—places that are used for other events or simply stay empty during non-market days.

We adopt a mobility approach (Cresswell, 2010; Sheller & Urry, 2006) and a transnational perspective (Dahinden, 2017; Glick Schiller et al., 1992) to grasp the significance and construction of the markets' local character. Embracing a mobility perspective is a means to overcome the 'sedentary bias' still wide-spread in social sciences (Urry, 2007)—namely, a position which normalises stillness and immobility. Instead of assuming rooted and bounded communities, a mobility lens challenges such static notions of society. It opens up possibilities to investigate the various movements of vendors as well as their products, be this on small or broader spatial scales. A transnational perspective stands for endorsing a particular, alternative stance on social science issues, to overcome methodological nationalism and to go beyond the 'national container' (Wimmer & Schiller, 2002). As we will show, these lenses allow for unpacking multiple dynamics which produce the local character of markets.

As we observed, the local is imbued with different meanings, sometimes relating to the vendors but often also to the products sold on markets. Literature on local food systems and food localism demonstrates the complex and contested meanings of the local when it comes to food (Forney, 2016). Indeed, "local food means different things to different people in different contexts" (Eriksen, 2013: 49). In this chapter, we analyse these different meanings and their links to mobility and transnationality.

Our conclusion shows that marketplaces can be understood as a particular local expression of global identity politics. Markets are local only insofar as vendors apply many strategies to bind their clients in proximity—but their locality is also conditioned by their embeddedness in global identity politics where mobility, transnationality and nationalism play a crucial role in the economic success of markets.

#### Relational proximity and the mobility of vendors

And for me, it is really about the short distances, the proximity of the citizen with his or her farmer.

(Interview with city councillor, 23 April 2020)

Food markets are often imagined as facilitating direct contact between producers and consumers, a relationship presented as "immediate, personal and enacted in shared space" (Hinrichts, 2000: 295). Yet, dwelling more deeply within this assumed natural locality of markets allows us to unpack interesting aspects regarding the ways in which market actors produce proximity. Relational proximity is often presented as having particular qualities (Alkon & McCullen, 2011), which ideally embody mutual, long-established familiarity and trust. As studies on local food systems have argued, such a face-to-face interaction between consumers and growers is opposed to large-scale, industrialised systems of food production and distribution (Eriksen, 2013; Hinrichts, 2003), and this is an important facet upon which outdoor markets capitalise.

As in the previous quote, the fresh food markets in our case studies were not represented as places of *casual* encounters between vendors and customers. Instead, the city councillor draws on a (romanticised) image of proximity in terms of market relations between producers and consumers. Indeed, customers showed great solidarity and fidelity when markets had to close down due to restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic. One vendor told us, "People were really loyal (...) I received many messages like this, people really wanted to support us, to continue buying our produce" (interview with vendor, 18 May 2020). In line with customers' wishes to support regional producers, the value of solidarity becomes enacted in relationships between farmers and local consumers (Forney, 2016).

Market vendors were thus aware of and enacted the image of relational proximity through multiple strategies. A young vendor told us that in her experience, it is important to always "have the same face behind the stall", to build up a relationship with customers. Her employer, an old-aged farmer, would always be present during market hours and available for a brief chat with clients, an activity she believes encourages customers to return. Similarly, a successful vendor with several employees told us that he always asks his selling personnel to smile and talk with their customers because "if people come to the market, it's to have someone to talk to".

Establishing personal connections with customers is a widespread practice of farmers to build up regular customers. To do so, vendors chat about the weather, different farming methods or gardening techniques, and one vendor told us he even invites his regular customers to drink a coffee from time to time, as "this is part of it". We also observed vendors offering their clients some parsley, coriander or chives for free, and when asked, several explained that it was to emphasise their difference from anonymous supermarkets.

However, to become recognised by their clients, stallholders insist on their exact and consistent emplacement. Changes in the spatial allocation of the stalls on the market—for example, due to construction work, temporary utilisation of the place for another event, or during the COVID-19 pandemic—are met with protests. Vendors told us that they need to be precisely at the same spot, otherwise their clients would not find them. One vendor stated that he is the third generation selling on a particular spot, thus stressing a historically anchored link to the specific location.

Furthermore, in many markets, vendors post a plaque displaying their family name—often identifiable as local—and the residence address. Here, the institutional framework in the form of the written market regulation stipulates the vendors' proximity strategies: it transmits the idea that the vendors and their products sold at a particular stall originate from the nearby village indicated on the plaque.

However, this drawn image of markets as spaces of relational proximity between local farmers and their customers masks the translocal or transnational networks and mobility practices of most market vendors. The relational aspects of the local are only enabled by vendors' translocal and transnational mobility. While some of the vegetable sellers do indeed grow their own products, all the farmers we talked to also buy a part of the fresh produce they sell on the market (see the following), and to do so, they are mobile.

Some vendors do not grow anything themselves but buy all the produce from farmers or wholesalers to resell them on the market, a fact their customers are often not aware of. This practice is embedded in multiple mobility patterns as well. Some vendors spend the day before a market driving around to collect produce from farmers. Others order from intermediary vendors or drive to neighbouring France once a week to buy fresh produce and import it to Switzerland. A vendor told us that he sometimes travels to Southern Italy to directly meet with a distributor, who is himself in contact with the farmers: "I already went to Sicily four times to meet him. With EasyJet it is simple, you get a ticket for 80 Swiss Francs, and you fly to Sicily" (interview with vendor, 12 June 2020).

As these cases demonstrate, the networks between farmers, wholesale markets and market vendors often span regional and national borders. The produce has already been sold and resold several times before it arrives on the marketplace. As vendors and products circulate, they become only literally localised during the market day. Yet, through the previously described practices, these issues remain in the shadow with only the representation of proximity being produced.

Moreover, vendors usually drive to the marketplace from outside the city. As part of this mobility, vendors move their selling point with them, a highly labour-intense practice. As one vendor put it,

We have to get up at 4 or 5 am to prepare the crates and then come to the market and build up the stall. Every single time (...) though there are supermarkets with everything you can dream of. And just next to them, twice a week, there is a kind of absurd theatre going on. We build up stalls with planks of wood, we put the crates and then we sell salads. (...) It is really like a kind of theatre from another time that happens in the middle of this ultra-technical society. What a paradox!

(Interview with farm employee/vendor, 18 April 2020)

When customers arrive at the market, all they see are the already installed stalls offering 'local products' and with the well-known faces behind them. The mobility of the vendors and their products remain invisible as they perform the 'theatre' which produces markets as local. Put another way, the image of local markets as natural encounters between vendors and consumers is built on the idea of proximity, which is the result of vendors' high investment in localisation and mobility practices.

#### Markets as expressions of banal and affective nationalism

People (...) really want seasonal vegetables that are from here... that don't come from abroad. Actually, that's the reason for people to come to the market. They want fruit and vegetables that are Swiss, not coming from Italy or abroad.

(Interview with farmer/vendor, 30 March 2020)

As this quote suggests, customers choose food markets when looking for local produce. However, a product being considered as local is the result of all market actors' negotiations and imaginaries. This becomes clear in the following quote by a producer who told us that first she only sold homegrown vegetables, but then she started to enlarge her offer with other Swiss products:

Even older clients, when they ask "ah, you already have your own tomatoes?" and I say "no, it's not my tomatoes yet, but they are Swiss", they are okay with it and take them. I wouldn't dare to sell them strawberries from Spain, no way. You need to keep this, it has to stay Swiss. Oh, that's important to them.

(Interview with farmer/vendor, 15 June 2020)

As this quote demonstrates, the idea of local food as having been grown in close geographical proximity often intermingles with its national origin. Meanings of a product's locality here intersect with national boundaries and a national imaginary of Swiss products being the 'best'. This is probably a particular phenomenon for food markets, given that there exists a specific link between what is considered to be 'good' when it comes to food. The latter is based on ideas of the freshness and quality of the products, as one vendor put it: "These vegetables just taste differently, fresh and better". Furthermore, the criterion of quality is often related to ecological arguments such as less transport miles or the seasonality of products on the market. Consequently, buying Swiss products rather than imported ones is perceived as more environmentally friendly. Indeed, in Switzerland, the view of Swiss agriculture as being more ecological than in other countries is widespread, as Forney and Häberli (2016) found.

However, as those authors argue, "this belief has not been empirically evidenced" (Forney & Häberli, 2016: 148). Rather, the idea of local food as automatically being better is part of what DuPuis and Goodman (2005) have identified as an 'unreflexive localism' in alternative food movement activism. During our fieldwork, we overheard customers asking for Swiss produce, which illustrates the tendency to estimate that local food is better. Thus, vegetables and fruit which are produced in Switzerland acquire value as such. In other terms, 'local' often means grown within the national borders of Switzerland.

We would therefore go one step further and argue that markets can be analysed as an expression of what has been called *affective nationalism* (Antonsich & Skey, 2017): market customers display an affective and emotional relationship to Swissness when they automatically assume that Swiss products are the best and

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when vendors put forward the same image. Additionally, marketplaces have a crucial role in what Billig (1995) labelled *banal nationalism*: Swiss products on the markets turn into everyday representations of the nation, which build a shared sense of national belonging linked to a particular (national) territory. Indeed, some market vendors carefully pay attention to communicating their products' Swiss origin by displaying the Swiss cross on the crates. Markets turn here into places where relations between people and products underpin national forms of identification and expression. In a nutshell, Swissness makes the markets work.

As any form of nationalism always goes hand in hand with closure and containment within the 'national container' (Wimmer, 2002; Basch et al., 1994), it does not come as a surprise that simultaneously transnational actors and links in the making of the Swiss, local agricultural products are rendered invisible. In fact, our transnational and mobility perspective helps depict many ways in which this affective and banal nationalism works as a filter producing blind spots for the transnational connections and embeddedness of the markets: most of all, they render invisible migrant labour which is based on transnational mobility.

While customers on the market usually come into contact with Swiss farmers or their Swiss student employees, they rarely meet all those who have also worked to plant and harvest the produce. Analysing farmers' markets in the United States, Alkon and McCullen (2011) observe that the Latino/a farmworkers, who are instrumental to producing the food, seldom sell at farmers' markets. "Indeed, despite consumers' assumptions to the contrary, many market farms rely heavily on non-family labour" (Alkon & McCullen, 2011: 946). In Switzerland, additional non-family labour gradually becomes more important, especially during the harvest season (Arnaut et al., 2015). The Swiss farmers union estimates 30,000 to 35,000 temporary migrant farmworkers being active in the Swiss agricultural sector, recruited mainly from within the European Union, especially from Poland, Romania and Portugal (Jaberg, 2018). Most have employment contracts of three to nine months' duration and work 50 to 55 hours per week. As agriculture is highly labour-intensive, salaries are comparatively low, and "no Swiss wants to do this", as one farmer said during his interview.

The situation of temporary migrant farmworkers is rarely a topic in public media coverage nor in market participants' discourses. Customers usually ignore that temporary migrants perform the hard, low-cost labour on Swiss fields. Although products are locally grown, it is only through the mobility of a non-local workforce that production is even possible. Presenting products as of Swiss origin, thus drawing on the image of local as Swiss, market participants render invisible the (transnational) mobility of the workers necessary to produce 'local' food.

#### Reterritorialisation of local products from elsewhere

If you want to distinguish yourself [from supermarkets] you need products that stand out from the ordinary. So, I also prepare the olives, the sauces, the mix. That's what customers like, because it's "homemade", so to speak. (Interview with vendor, 13 June 2020) Interestingly, market participants reproduce the image of the products sold at Swiss fresh food markets as being local, even though part of the offer is imported from abroad, such as olives in the previous quote. Here, the local acquires another meaning, as it implies specific values, even if defined on transnational grounds. As in the quote made by a woman selling olives, tapenades and vinegar, market participants construct markets as local in terms of the national origin of the products and specific values attached to the products. Thus, even products grown in other countries may be labelled and appear local—though sourced from faraway.

The image of markets as spaces where local Swiss products are sold is upheld, although many fruits and vegetables cannot be cultivated in Switzerland, particularly during the winter season. All the producers to whom we spoke who sell their own 'locally' grown fruit and vegetables also offer imported products. This is regarded as necessary in order to economically survive as direct-vending farmers. As one farmer in his sixties put it, "[Y]ou know, were I to try to sell what my parents brought on the market, it would never work out." Laughing, he told us about the old times when farmers would bring two baskets of potatoes and carrots to the market. He had to diversify his offer, in the same way as all the other farmers and vendors on the market, who also told us that their customers value a large offer. Similarly, a fruit farmer who grows apples, cherries, plums and berries and directly sells all his fresh products on two city markets, told us that his clients ask for 'exotic fruit' such as bananas. Like all the other vendors, he buys them at the large wholesale market on the night before the market, where he then sells about 150 kg of bananas per week.

Besides bananas, avocados and other so-called exotic fruit produced on other continents, Swiss market vendors also sell flowers grown in the Netherlands, apricots and olives grown in France and vegetables such as tomatoes, eggplant, red pepper, lemons and oranges, grown in Italy and Spain. Vendors present these vegetables usually in green crates instead of the original packaging, which remind customers of, for example, the broccoli's real production place outside of Switzerland. Even though vendors inform their customers of the export country when asked directly, they render invisible the non-Swiss origin of many of their products.

Market vendors also contribute to the banal and affective elements of nationalism as part of their business strategies. A vendor, who described himself as someone who sells carefully selected products like fruit and olives of good quality, told us,

Sometimes it's funny. People don't want anything from Spain because they were made to believe that only Spain treats fruit [chemically]. So a Spanish peach: no, but an Italian peach: yes. Even if it is probably treated in exactly the same ways, or probably even more in France, but "France is the best", then Italy, and then Spain.

(Interview with vendor, 26 May 2020)

The symbolic value attached to supposedly less chemically treated fruit is also visible in the prices. According to the fruit vendor, fruit from France is the most

expensive, followed by products grown in Italy and then Spain. As revealed in the interview with the fruit vendor, market vendors have to navigate their customers' demand for food they symbolically value more due to a specific provenance. Some vendors choose to import fruit grown in specific regions in France and also travel to those places "so that, when people ask questions about apricots, I can tell them exactly where they come from, how everything works". To re-inscribe their offer into the calls for qualitatively outstanding products, vendors present theirs as individually chosen, qualitatively outstanding products with a clear origin in a place.

As Forney and Häberli (2016) write in a study on localisation strategies in the Swiss dairy industry, every "food product has an origin, but only in specific contexts does origin become a value" (Forney & Häberli, 2016: 140). Indeed, French-speaking market participants in our research used the notion of *terroir* to refer to the origin of some regional specialty products. This notion encompasses more than the aspect of a specific soil or origin, as it connects the history, the place and the specificities of a product (Barham, 2003; Forney & Häberli, 2016). Market vendors have built on the supposed value of specific origin, using what can be termed a 'reterritorialisation strategy'. The latter is framed in the nation-state logic: products are presented as French, Spanish or Italian. Furthermore, the countries are hierarchised in terms of the assumed quality of products. The nation-state logic serves here to link the idea of *terroir* to places outside of Switzerland.

Hitherto, this reterritorialisation strategy works not only for products, but also for the people selling the product. For example, we observed cheese vendors, who sell cheese made in Italy, using Italian words to attract customers and thus mobilising ethnicity in a context demanding for a specific type of authenticity (Menet, 2020). Similarly, a migrant vendor who imports fruit from central Africa to sell them on the market advertises her fruit as 'exotic' and 'wild', and directly demonstrates to her customers how they should cut the fruit. In performing her knowledge thus, she purposefully renders visible her transnational links. The sedentary element inherent in the nation-state logic (Dahinden, 2012; Ghorashi, 2017) serves, in this case, to transnationally embed a product in its (often national) terroir and territory and to transnationalise the meaning of local. Vendors position themselves in this transnational logic by mobilising the representation of authenticity: to do so, in the case of vendors of symbolically higher valued specialty products, they create the idea of authentic (local) products from elsewhere. Through reterritorialisation, vendors actively keep up ideas of locality even if this local is faraway, either by linking it to a territory or through their own national origins.

#### Conclusion

In this chapter, we set out to explore the different meanings of the local within two Swiss marketplaces and how they are (re)produced by market vendors. We identified three different meanings of 'local' and argue that they are the result of market participants' practices, be they deliberate or unintentional. The first meaning is *relational proximity*: at first sight, markets are local and temporally and spatially confined, as vendors and consumers meet in co-presence. Vendors apply different strategies to create not casual encounters but long-lasting relationships. The local emerges through these tactics which aim at binding customers to particular vendors. However, these local relational binding efforts rely on practices that are anything other than local: instead, this relational proximity is enabled by the mobility and translocal and transnational practices of the vendors and the circulation of their products—practices that often remain hidden from the customers.

Second, products are interpreted as local as long as they are grown within the *Switzerland's national borders*. Local in this sense is about *Swiss* products: the value of Swissness is displayed in everyday encounters and consumers assume that Swiss equals quality. Therefore, markets can be seen as places based upon and reproducing banal nationalism as much as affective aspects of a shared sense of national belonging. Nevertheless, every form of nationalism produces blind spots, here the networks that go beyond the national container, such as migrant farmworkers harvesting Swiss produce.

The third meaning of the local is a *transnationalised* one based on the idea of *terroir* and anchored in the sedentary logic of the nation-state. In this meaning, local turns into 'local from somewhere else'. To re-inscribe their products into the calls for qualitatively outstanding produce, vendors present theirs with a clear national origin while different origins become hierarchised in terms of the quality of the products. This 'reterritorialisation strategy' works for products as much as for vendors who mobilise their transnational links in order to highlight the authenticity of their products of a particular origin and their knowledge about the history of the place and product.

These results deserve further discussion, as they give insights into broader social processes. We argue that markets play a role in global identity politics in at least two different ways. First, based on an analysis of the 'local food systems' literature, Eriksen (2013: 48) suggests a taxonomy of local food: "geographical proximity, relations of proximity, and values of proximity". These three domains crosscut with our results and are of crucial importance to markets as local as we have shown. We argue, however, that this literature omits mobility and transnational aspects, with the risk of reproducing a sedentary bias. The mobility of vendors and concomitant circulation of products are fundamental for producing the local character of markets. The markets in our study can be understood as a hinge between the local and transnational, as they are situated at the intersection of different global cultural and economic flows (Appadurai, 1990). Markets are embedded in and simultaneously reproduce a global identity politics where nationalism is one of the crucial motors. By their production of locality, markets underpin national forms of identification and expression, and these issues are important facets of the economic functioning of markets.

Second, there is abundant literature depicting the crucial role food plays for migrants (Morasso & Zittoun, 2014). Food can be considered as a national identity marker for migrants, and it produces national belonging. Interestingly, we depict something similar to Swiss markets and their customers: our results show

that food markets can be analysed as a form of Swiss national identity politics. Hence, we suggest 'de-migranticising' (Dahinden, 2016) research on migration and combining it with research on food, nationalism and identity. In this way, the idea of food as an expression of national identities is not relegated solely to migrants. Instead, from a social science perspective, it would be interesting to bring together these fields of research and investigate the role of food and related institutions such as markets for national identities, be it of migrants or non-migrants. These results demonstrate that a focus on markets and the production of their supposedly local character is an interesting case to carve out different facets of a global identity politics.

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