



Laura Nistor: The Puzzles of Local Food Consumption. Empirical Insights regarding Profiles, Motivations, and Discourses

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This monographic book is a synthesis of sociologist Laura Nistor's post-doctoral research on sustainable food consumption in Romania. Theoretical and empirical inquiries contextualize alternative ways of consumption, as reflected in social movements tagged *slow food*, *local food*, or *organic food*. The theoretical background deals both with macro- and micro-levels of sociological analysis, well rooted in relevant literature, whereas empirical research is based on a secondary quantitative analysis and a qualitative inquiry using focus-group interviews across Romanian urban areas. When it comes to local food consumption, on a macro-level, we are dealing with environmental principles and practices motivated both by energy efficiency and community development outcomes. On a micro-sociological level of analysis, if we take the consumers' perspective, the issue of local food choice is concerned with trust and health benefits. Transparency and traceability of food sources are benefits that are hard to compete by global mass production.

The book has three main chapters dealing both with theoretical and empirical issues of sustainable consumption in general, and local food choice in particular. A thorough literature review scanning 166 titles digs deeper into the issues of sustainable agriculture and value systems related to local food choice: Is it affordable? Is it desirable from a generic social, economic, and environmental perspective? Are local producers ready to provide quality?

The first chapter – *Food Consumption as a Specific Form of Consumption* – redefines the taken-for-granted term of consumption from a critical perspective: from a mere health-related, biologist view to a sociological approach on practices, risks, and alternative ways of relating to food. Social movements coagulated around specific ideologies and practices of food consumption divide opinions and unite individuals into communities at the same time. Food option becomes

more than a mere practical issue: it defines individual and group choices from an ethical point of view, for certain socio-demographic categories. The analysis of socio-demographic profiles, motivations, and impediments of alternative consumption led to the conclusion that food system localization creates direct relationships between producers and consumers, while information on the origins of food, freshness and authenticity, and re-personalization of commercial relations are key benefits of local food choice.

The second chapter presents the results of a secondary analysis based on Eurobarometer data related to Romanians' food choices in terms of their preference for extrinsic and intrinsic product cues. The author concludes that Romanians' alternative food consumption is double-rooted in price and quality, as a confirmation of Bourdieu's theory on the relationship between social status and taste. "In Romania, similarly to Europe, price preferences are entrenched in the respondents' precarious socio-economic status, while the preference for quality seems to be a habitus specific for higher social status" (Introduction, p. 7.).

The third chapter summarizes the results of a thorough qualitative analysis and focuses on discourses about local food. A total of ten focus-group interviews have been conducted in five Romanian urban locations, two in each location: six in large cities (Bucharest, Braşov, and Cluj-Napoca) and four in small towns (Miercurea Ciuc and Sfântu Gheorghe), with an additional online group interview via Skype, connecting respondents from all locations. The key issue was how respondents conceptualized local food, which were the strengths and weaknesses of such products, and which were their types of consumer involvement. While the meaning of locally produced food was defined around geographies and manufacturing practices, its strengths and weaknesses were related to price, quality, and reliability: "When I come to such markets, I usually come for the natural products. (...) It happened to me that I bought products which later on proved to be not so natural. But, I still like the atmosphere of these markets, the fact that I can meet the producers, I like to taste the products, to explore... In any case, these are more natural than all those foods sold in the supermarket... Unfortunately, we cannot afford to buy everything from here... (woman, Braşov)" (Chapter 3, p. 108). The recurrent positive attributes of local food defined by focus-group respondents include properties like: "healthy", "tasty", "traditional", "natural", or "organic", whereas negative traits were conceptualized as "greasy", "sugary", "fattening", "expensive", and "unsafe". Positive and negative qualities of local food are not mutually exclusive in respondents' discourses: they are often mentioned together: healthy but expensive, natural but greasy, etc.

Laura Nistor concludes that although social and environmental benefits of local food are mentioned as positive components, they are not conceptualized as outcomes of consumption but rather as inherent qualities. They are seen as constitutive elements of local food only to the extent of mass consumption. "The

difference is that while a good taste, a natural ingredient, etc. can be experienced also in the form of sampling, i.e. without a concrete, long-term attachment to the product, the environmental and ethical benefits are seen as components which imply long-term attachment to the process. (...) the naturalness of the local food overwrites the attribute of healthiness” (Chapter 3, pp. 114–115).

Amidst scarce to non-existent empirical research on sustainable food consumption in Romania, Laura Nistor’s book is a valuable contribution. It invites sociologists and decision-makers to deepen reflection on what sustainable food production and consumption means for a country with an ageing population striving with poverty, social inequality, and a low level of environmental awareness.