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Redefining Agricultural Geography as the Geography of Food

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## Comments

Discussion arising from papers in *Area*

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### Redefining agricultural geography as the geography of food

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We should be grateful to Bowler and Ilbery (1987) for their timely reassessment of agricultural geography, which has recently seemed becalmed in a Sargasso Sea of production functions and tedious typologies. They rightly profess a progressive and more coherent view of the sub-discipline which emphasises the links between agriculture and the wider society and economy. Just how radical is their redefinition, however? Their revised agenda can be seen as state-of-the-artism rather than a true demolition and reconstruction job.

It is hardly surprising that agriculture *qua* production should be receiving less attention in this country. With only about 2 per cent of the employed UK work force and the same contribution to GDP, it is a sector of declining relative significance. According to Burns (1979) over 50 per cent of the value of food on the supermarket shelves is added after it has passed through the farm gate, and clearly it would be irresponsible of geographers to neglect the downstream portions of processing and supply networks. I therefore strongly support the call by Bowler and Ilbery for a study of supply systems. I wish to go further, however, and argue for the metamorphosis of agricultural geography into a geography of food along the following lines.

First, with certain notable exceptions, there has been an unfortunate neglect by agricultural geographers of the rural development process in poor countries. Agricultural geography has been dominated by concern for farmers and farming in the 'north', with the rural 'south' left to development specialists. In his recent textbook, for instance, Ilbery (1985) explicitly excludes the developing world from his project. This imbalance is difficult to justify. About 87 per cent of the world's farmers and agricultural workers live in countries with an annual per capita income of less than \$1,600, where the ultra poor may spend up to 80 per cent of their disposable income on food. Here the production and consumption of food dominate people's lives and livelihoods. Traditional agricultural geography can play a valuable part in our comprehension of both the ecological setting and the socio-economic circumstances of production in less developed areas, but understanding the onward connections into regional and national food systems needs a broader vision. Recent work has increased our knowledge of the place of agricultural marketing in the process of underdevelopment through the investigation of exchange relations (Harriss, 1984), of famine by examining entitlements to food in crisis situations (Sen 1981), and of food problems and policies at various scales (Grigg 1985; Tarrant 1980), but the holistic reconstruction and

exploration of food systems (production, processing, transport, marketing, consumption) has so far attracted less geographical attention. This is understandable perhaps in view of the size and complexity of the task.

Secondly, a related and complementary theme is the role of food systems in our own historical development process. Anthropologists and historians (Fenton and Kisban 1986; Rotberg and Rabb 1985) seem to have staked out the only claims so far to this important field, but historical geographers should be aware of the crucial place of food in the evolving structure of developed societies. Dodgshon (1987) suggests, for instance, that food was the key commodity in the nascent integration of a 'world system' of trading relations in the nineteenth century. Although this nodality has been eroded in recent times, foodstuffs in their raw and processed form still attract capital investment on a large scale. Bowler and Ilbery rightly point to the emergence of agribusiness and the pivotal role of multinational corporations in moulding contemporary global food systems, but even before 1900 we can profitably study the mechanisms which drew together the threads of national and international food economies (Peet 1972). Furthermore we might reasonably argue that an efficient supply of food, as a necessary condition for rapid urbanisation, was and is one of the major contextual factors facilitating the growth, change and elaboration of modern society.

Thirdly, I propose a revived geography of diet and nutrition. French geographers (Thouvenot 1978) have a tradition of work in this area, as do American cultural geographers (Simoons 1961), but their efforts have tended to be separate from those of agricultural geographers *per se*. Indeed Bowler and Ilbery sketch an outline of food *supply* systems which implicitly excludes consumption. A study of an integrated food system is incomplete without following its social and economic consequences to their logical conclusion in the lives of the consumers. Hitherto we have concentrated on the producer and production; perhaps the time has come for a re-orientation towards the product and the consumer. An excellent example of this approach is the recent spate of publications on the relationship between nutrition and agricultural development (Pacey and Payne 1986). There is also scope for a geography of food habits and diet in the UK, the National Food Survey providing a convenient data source. The link between diet and health is by now firmly established in most people's minds and research into spatial patterns revealed by the NFS is currently providing important insights into diseases of deficiency and excess (Barker *et al.* 1986).

These three suggested themes are but a sample of the many that one could identify. They comprise two principal ideas: the broadening of the base of agricultural geography as it stands to subsume the non-farm elements of the food system, and an extension of the spatial and temporal scope of research to incorporate the study of the evolution of world food systems. A focus principally on food would bring both teaching and research into sharper resolution, imbue a coherence which is presently lacking, but not exclude any of the items on Bowler and Ilbery's agenda. Such a re-orientation would also be in step with a broad trend in social science towards a greater awareness of food issues. Bowler and Ilbery have redefined agricultural geography in order to reproduce it. Let us be bolder. Agricultural geography is dead: long live the geography of food!

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## Teaching and research: author's reply to comments

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I appear to have written a truly seminal paper. I am delighted that my two and a half side observation (Knight 1987) has stimulated 12 pages of comment (Jenkins 1988; Shepherd 1988; Batty and Matthews 1988) and that it has drawn comment from both polytechnic and university sources. However, I am disappointed in the level of the criticism, and worried that much of the comment confuses the purpose of my original note and misses or avoids the key issue. Nevertheless, I shall resist the temptation to make my reply longer than my original observation.

There are two points I wish to take up. First the criticism of my observation and secondly the way in which my critics attribute to me ideas which I never put forward and thus misrepresent my observation so as to justify platforming their own strongly held views on issues with which my observation was not concerned. Evidently some raw nerves have been touched here.

My observation was a simple one, and deliberately ignored many relevant but peripheral issues so as to focus on a single, specific question; namely whether university teaching and research could be treated so separately as to be segregated into separate institutions.

Both Jenkins and Shepherd comment on my methodological ineptitude, apparently assuming that my goal had been to gather a mass of data and proceed inductively to base conclusions on whatever correlations emerged. Had that been my intention, then my sampling and statistical procedure would indeed have been inept, but the way one proceeds to answer a question depends on the nature of the question, and I avoided the empirical inductive route not only to escape the methodological problems that Jenkins and Shepherd point out, but also because of the more fundamental problems of basing conclusions on inductive correlation. As my goal was to test the specific research-teaching hypothesis implicit in the Oxburgh proposal, a hypothetico-deductive approach based on the principal of falsification was much more appropriate. The