MAKING FOOD VALUED OR THE VALUE(S) OF FOOD: A STUDY OF LOCAL FOOD GOVERNANCE ARRANGEMENTS IN NEWCASTLE, ENGLAND

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Abstract: This paper charts some of the changes that have occurred within the city of Newcastle in northeast England regarding different actors perceptions and involvement with the potential creation of a holistic food policy for the city, between 2009 and 2015. The paper is informed by a range of qualitative data and adopts a new institutional approach, which focuses on the sociological and discursive institutionalisms, to help explore the evolution and constraints to the emergence of a food policy for the city.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

There has been an increasing trend towards the development of local/city/municipal based food policies and strategies in recent years, particularly but not exclusively in the global north, but which collectively has marked 'the rise of urban food planning' as a practice (Morgan, 2013, p.1379; 2015). Such strategic engagement reflects the increasing political awareness of food that has promoted a growth in partnership working and civil society collaboration (Bedore, 2014; Morgan, 2013, 2015). One reason behind this may be the 'convening power of food' (Morgan, 2009, p.343) which given the multi-functional character of the food system and its potential to intersect with a range of policy and communal interests facilitates their possible coming together, and which stretch beyond the traditional and often mandatory scope of local/municipal government actors such as public health to consider wider economic, social and ecological benefits from these connections (Wiskerke, 2009; Morgan, 2015). Although the motivations from local government have been questioned amidst austerity capitalism and pressures placed on local civil society actors responsiveness to overcome or relieve social problems while not impacting on economic growth or other policy agendas and imperatives (Mansfield and Mendes, 2013; Bedore, 2014). However, what is emerging is a growing wealth of detailed engagement with food policy, and the institutional arrangements associated with this, although with the exception of Halliday (2015) and her explicit application of new institutional analysis in studying five English initiatives, the institutional arrangements in the process of a policy's possible creation and implementation are rarely expressly considered.

1.2 Aim

This paper's aim is to offer an exploratory consideration of emerging food policy related initiatives in the city of Newcastle in northeast England, focusing particularly on the changing institutional involvement with food by different actors revealed through a discursive institutionalist perspective.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 New Institutionalism and the role of discourse

Institutions are about and reflect process. The body of literatures referred to as 'new institutionalism' emerged in the 1980s and recognized the importance of values, norms, rules, practices and structures and how these become internalised and institutionalised in everyday practice. Such institutions affected both daily life and individual and organisational behaviour, primarily with respect to political and policy situations and the distribution of power within these. There is no one singular approach but rather a body of work from social and political sciences that together has contributed to the development of what has often been referred to as new institutionalisms (Hall and Taylor, 1996; see also March and Olsen, 1984; 1989; 2006; DiMaggio and Powell, 1991a; Lowndes, 1996; 2002; Blondel, 2006). Three core strands of new institutionalism have been identified: rational choice, historical and sociological (Hall and Taylor, 1996). Rational choice approaches argue that actors respond to exogenous imperatives (whether crisis or some form of dilemma) by making strategic decisions motivated by self interest that pursue goals of utility maximisation and the institutions created are a reflection of this, whereas historical institutionalism suggests that actors will reflect on past behaviours and how these are interpreted will be used to inform future expectations and as such institutions develop and follow a routinized or path dependent trajectory within their specific setting (Hall and Taylor, 1996; Steele, 2011). Sociological institutionalism is concerned with how an individual's or organisation's behaviour is structured and defined as appropriate by social and cultural norms. Sociological institutionalism works with the idea that institutions occur by the internalisation and taken for grantedness of norms and practices, but as these are informed by cultural frames of reference and values they reflect a more practical and subjective reasoning than the other institutional strands (Hall and Taylor, 1996; Vigar et al., 2000; Steele, 2011). A process informed by social relations may reproduce or reinterpret the diversity of signs, symbols, discourses and framings with respect to wider economic relations and civil society hints at the possibility of continual institutional evolution (Hall and Taylor, 1996; Vigar et al., 2000; Steele, 2011). In turn through greater consideration of the creation, maintenance and possible change to institutions has led to an exploration of its impact on actor's behaviours and influence local governance arrangements and practices, including planning (Lowndes, 2001; Cars et al., 2002; Davies, 2004; González and Healey, 2005; Fuller, 2010).

New institutionalist approaches have been criticised for their apparent propensity for constraining behaviour and static situations rather than offer a capacity to initiate, encourage or explore change (Lowndes, 1996; 2002). For example within historical institutionalism there has been a tendency to focus on ideas within an existing policy area rather than how it may change especially with respect to different external ideas (Fuller, 2010). However, within sociological institutionalist approaches, institutions are recognised as embedded processes that are socially constituted and socially constructed. This recognition has enabled the 'rules of the game' to be subjected to wider scrutiny through specifically considering how social and cultural relations inform and shape the identities, expectations, interests and behaviour of individual actors within and outwith formal institutional settings. One such way has been through a focus on discourse and incorporating discourse analysis into sociological institutionalism and its focus on the 'meaning structures and constructs' of institutions (Schmidt, 2010, p.5). A distinctive policy discourse analysis drawing from sociological institutionalism has also been taken forward by Vigar et al., (2000) which focused specifically on the social relations that underpin the production and use of discourses as a frame of reference within specific policy settings to help identify how policies and other ideas are articulated, defined and

positioned recognising the possible impacts of the discursive practice for power relations and wider context specific consequences.

Schmidt (2008, 2010) has through her development of 'discursive institutionalism', and its potential to capture endogenous change and continuity, argues for it to be seen as an additional strand of new institutionalism that complements and bridges the other three approaches:

> 'The 'institutionalism' in discursive institutionalism suggests that this approach is not only about the communication of ideas or 'text' but also about the institutional context in which and through which ideas are communicated via discourse. The institutions of discursive institutionalism, however, are not the external rule-following structures of the three older institutionalisms that serve primarily as constraints on actors, whether as rationalist incentives, historical paths, or cultural frames. They are instead simultaneously constraining structures and enabling constructs of meaning which are internal to 'sentient' (thinking and speaking) agents whose 'background ideational abilities' explain how they create and maintain institutions at the same time that their 'foreground discursive abilities' enable them to communicate critically about those institutions to change (or maintain) them' (Schmidt, 2010, p.4).

In this paper I follow a new institutionalist approach that focuses particularly on sociological institutionalism and subsequent authors emphasis on discourse. This recognises that competing ideas and identities are commonplace as not everyone accepts the same rules or shares the same understanding. The discursive approach also enables the issue of power and position to be critically incorporated into analyses of change.   Rather than equating power with position, discursive institutionalism recognises that powerful discourses may be also owned and presented by those deemed to be in the least powerful positions.   Indeed 'institutions are simultaneously structures and constructs internal to the agents themselves' (Schmidt, 2008, p.322).   By following a discursive approach tensions and conflict between institutions can also be more fully explored and addresses a further criticism of new institutionalism (Vigar et al., 2000; March and Olsen, 2006; Torfing, 2001).

As discourses are 'embedded in institutional practices' that guide and pattern behaviour (Hajer and Laws, 2006; p.261), this approach enables the 'how' engagement with food and the idea of a food policy has emerged with regard to the nuances of local actors and the local policy and political context of the city of Newcastle. As the focus is on an emerging food policy in the city it is useful to consider from a new institutional perspective the possibility of path dependent or path shaping responses to the advent of the idea of a food policy for the city.

2.2   Path dependent or path shaping?

Different actors responses are to the appearance of a new issue, event, problem or even new actor have a tendency to adopt one of two approaches: *path dependency* or *path shaping* behaviours (Torfing, 2001; Davies, 2004). As previously noted path dependency is commonly associated with historical institutionalism based on the premise that the extent of past investments and interests will pre-dispose and structure the individual to follow previous behaviour, and so the trajectory that they follow in their daily practice is based on a logic that is contextualised and dependent on past paths (Davies, 2004). Therefore, existing practices and norms become internal and informal constraints on current and future behaviour. Although it is possible that external actors may directly influence path dependent decisions by holding funding, assigning roles and responsibilities (Davies, 2004).

However, from a more sociological and discursive institutionalist perspective the actor's own discourses within which they construct and present any potential change are important. Torfing (2001, p.288) notes that policy paths possess:

> 'a certain elasticity; in most cases it can account for, and cope with, new and unintended events by means of mobilizing its discursive resources, stretching its interpretative schemes, and modifying its rule governed practices. However, the structured coherence of the policy path also imposes a limit to this elasticity.'

Once the limit of the discursive strategy is reached established rules, norms and practices start failing to provide a structure that can absorb the new issue/event/problem/etc. This changes the possible path taken from one of dependency to shaping; as an opportunity for change emerges through the discursive resolution of possible tensions and conflicts. But, elements of past practices may be incorporated into new responses, resulting in no clear or radical break in behaviours and something more akin to an evolutionary process occurs (Torfing, 2001). Consequently, a discursive perspective can help explore the possible path junctures in participants' discourse and practice as they negotiate food as a new political and policy issue around which a multiplicity of actors and interests are organised and the possible impacts on local institutional and governance arrangements.

3. Methodology

The original empirical data informing this paper draws from a range of sources, these include; interviews with key actors, observations from attending public meetings and publicly available documents, all generated between 2009-2015. Initial interviews conducted during 2009/10 when analysed highlighted varied involvement with local governance arrangements (local policy and/or policymakers and/or service delivery) concerning food issues at a time of political and economic uncertainty (expecting a change in national and potentially local government and still recoiling from the 2008 economic crisis). Since June 2013 through various events and organisational and political developments a food charter has been created for the city and the city is one of the six lead cities for the Sustainable Food Cities network running in the UK, although as yet the city does not have a published discrete food policy. Further interviews were conducted in 2015 with key actors concerning the changes occurring with respect to food policy developments and the institutional landscape.

The analysis presented in the following section emphasises the discursive logics identified following a sociological and discursive institutionalist approach.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Food as a discursive fix

During the 2009-10 phase of research many of the participants reflected on the growth of food as an issue and how it was becoming a feature of the governance landscape. It was generally commented on that there was a background but disconnected central government influence to the growth of what one participant termed the "food agenda" (grower/consumer organisation, 2010); the same participant dismissed central government food strategy with the comment "why have we bothered waiting" and viewed that policy had not caught up with personal politics. [This comment relates to the publication in early 2010 of the UK Government's Food Strategy (Defra, 2010). This strategy

offered no incentive for local level cross-cutting food policy, and following a change of Government in May 2010 was no longer followed.] The underpinning central influence on the food agenda was deemed by participants not to occur through the then UK Government's food strategy (as many were not aware of its development or publication) but through a pre-existing set of national indicators (begun 2004) around which local government with a range of local strategic partners together attempted to deliver common goals for the area based on local priorities chosen from the national indicator set and subsequently agreed with central government (Local Area Agreements), upon which future central funding was tied. This meant that competing background central government policy discourses (such as health inequality reduction to tackling climate change) and their translation into practice through the indicators and area agreements (some of the organisations were involved in such partnerships) was seen as the main influence on food governance arrangements. This also meant that without a dominant or coherent central government policy discourse on food to influence local government actors, participants tended to ascribe power and control in food policy related developments to local government/agency actors, as the following extracts show:

"I think it goes in phases, there was a period in the 80s where everybody had a food policy, because that was all to do with heart disease reduction. And now everybody's got a food policy because it's all to do with climate change. It comes, it goes, and yes, one of the ways that we would sell it to anybody who was interested is to say, yes, doing food will help you tick all these boxes that you have to tick." (National advocacy organisation participant, 2009)

"Well, the National Indicators are about outputs, so they are about changing specific things, obesity in children, independence in older adults, and they're nothing about food … but those indicators, for loads of them, you could say: 'Oh, you could do something about food for that' … And I think the clever councils have worked out that food is a cross-council thing, and if they use food as a theme, they can drive an awful lot of work. … what's in and what's out simply depends on what that council is interested in and there is no guidance anywhere, that says, if you're going to do a food strategy across your council, you have to include X, Y and Z, so they can put in what they want. And to be honest, that's the idea, it's local, it's what's important to you and your electorate and your communities and if they've told you that these are the five things in your food strategy that should be the most important things, then that's what you have in, so they are going to be different." (national quasi-public sector actor promoting food strategy initiatives, 2009)

One reading could construct food as a discursive fix to appease a number of different tensions and pressures from different sources at the local level. This could account for the growth in food strategies and local governance arrangements that were then being seen with some local government actors potentially using a discursive fix and mobilising their discursive resources to engender change and/or find an alternative route to delivering and steering behaviour. Such arrangements may be a radical change from previous practice but they are undertaken within the confines of expected and permitted practice (appropriate behaviours) by central as well as local policy actors. It may be within the context of, and active utilisation of, existing and dominant policy discourses relating to child obesity, community cohesion, climate change, etc., that emerging practices were being negotiated and are evolving into an overarching food discourse that is being reflected in more formalised food governance arrangements (such as cross-cutting strategies and partnerships).

However, the above account relates to national perspectives on food policy and strategies. Based on the participants accounts there was little evidence to suggest that local authorities or agencies within Newcastle had reached the point of discursive stretch, and were working along traditional parameters and activities. Some networks and partnership arrangements were found regarding food but often related to sectoral policy arrangements (i.e. focused on obesity and linking across public health teams and third sector organisations working on health issues and delivering particular services). Indeed, the possibility of an overarching food policy or a food discourse leading to changing practice was directly dismissed by some participants. For example, one growing/consumer organisation representative was dubious of food policy arrangements and particularly at local level, commenting:

> "…The local authority's not, food's not its agenda. School meals, public health, you know, it's so bitty. So when you drill down you can't get a kind of coherence. And there's some local authorities have had a bash at it but again, there's so many partners, so many potential partners involved, we end up with another bland statement."

Continuing:

> " … maybe we're trying to force a coherence that is probably not going to work at that sort of level, … my experience is as much to do with a political buy-in, political with a big and small p, and all these policies are only good if there's buy in to them, as opposed to an exercise in, you know, ticking a box, which I suspect that some local authorities get involved in. I mean you'd think somewhere like Newcastle, for instance, having such high environmental credentials, sustainability credentials, might have a go at this sort of thing, but I've no recollection of Newcastle doing anything on the food side. It's been talked about, but not really addressed. So if there's not a coherence of local authorities trying it, then it's not a policy priority."

The participant is also hinting at the growth of food strategies and food governance arrangements being a form of mimetic isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991b); where actors, particularly in times of uncertainty begin to model themselves on others, with a local food policy or strategy becoming a 'tick box' exercise.

4.2 *External values and expectations*

The timing of the first interviews coincided with a grant making scheme that promoted a range of food activities, this national charitable funding programme's existence began to reveal tensions between local actors involved in food-based actions at this time. This particularly highlighted the differences and distrust between those organisations who had been active for a lengthy period in the city and those newly responding to the food issues. For example:

> "… I just don't know where the food agenda's going to go, because there's a hell of a lot of people getting in on it … I mean, we've been doing it [food] for thirty years, because that's what [organisation name] is, that's what we do. But there are other organisations who are kind of getting involved in it and you think: "Is it mission drift, or is it a genuine desire to engage in this particular agenda?" Only time will tell." (grower/consumer organisation participant, 2010)

> "Jumping on the bandwagon, because they're not, you know food isn't part of their remit at all but funding for food is …" (producer/consumer organisation participant, 2010)

During interview with a representative of the funding programme (administered by one national charity, working in connection with another four with diverse interests) it became apparent that such external stimulus was focused on the development of local level food policy. The funding representative (interviewed 2009) commented:

> "if it's not community-led then we don't fund it … so we really don't want a sort of top-down approach at all **...** That being said, we do want projects to be connected to the places that they're working in. So on our form, we do ask if they have a contact at the local council and that kind of stuff to make sure that are sort of not just working in isolation ..."

Continuing later:

> **"…** there's another section in the application form that asks how a project will complement or contribute to any local, regional or national strategy and that sort of section you find out about all these different things that areas are doing ... there are all kinds of local strategies and action plans … an allotment action plan … but some of them are very local and some of them are wider than that, but they do all have to evidence how they are connected to, or at least be aware of and tie in with some of the local strategies … but we're trying to encourage it to happen if it's not already happening."

This funding programme provided an opportunity for organisations to continue and develop their activities. However, the application process exerted a pressure on all applicants to engage with local policy actors and promoted the idea of local level food-related strategies. This reflects the practice of coercive isomorphism, through pressure and expectation placed on applicants to engage with local policy (although as to what the extent of this engagement was/expected to be was not discussed) and which also holds elements of mimetic isomorphism through trying to create standard approaches for ease of evaluation purposes (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991b).

This latter aspect is important if we jump forward to 2015 and the existence of a food charter for Newcastle and its membership through the organisation Food Newcastle, and its funding by the Sustainable Food Cities Network (SFCN is itself funded by a major charitable donor, and administered through three leading food campaign organisations). The SFCN aims to inspire 50 cities in the UK to develop sustainable food initiatives (see Morgan, 2015). A representative of Food Newcastle (interview 2015) commented how their relationship with SFCN was somewhat "vague" and while there were no prescriptions regarding their activities they had "funding obligations to campaign on key issues" that were promoted by SFCN. In turn, cities (or rather member organisations) were encouraged to apply for awards from SCFN to externally validate their activities and show the extent of partnership working and local level change and actions achieved on key factors. Newcastle had been awarded a Bronze Sustainable Food City award in recognition of the work happening across a range of food and health related areas, and Food Newcastle was considering when to submit another award application in the hope of achieving a higher level award. The rationale from Food Newcastle's representative being while recognising the evaluation element it also provided a useful "engagement tool" and means of communication so that they could show to those involved in the initiative and those beyond "the work taking place" in the city by the organisation and around food.

4.3 Uncertainty about the policy process

Traditionally the linkage between local level policy actions and food have focused on public health outcomes (see above extracts). This historical way of working and lead policy area informed participants actions both in 2009 and 2015, with the local public health authority funding both the

Healthy City initiative (part of the World Health Organisation's network) and more latterly Food Newcastle, funded jointly with SCFN.

However, there was a shift overtime regarding what was deemed possible regarding a food policy over the time period studied. The issue of what was within local public sector actors control dominated participants' constructions during 2009-10 of what was possible through local action (see Hadjimichalis and Hudson, 2007), and as such local government powers, rules and practices were seen as both a constraint on, and opportunity for, action (at least within the known regulatory environment), but also a key site which organisations and groups had to independently attempt to link into. This is illustrated over the following extracts:

> "... we don't shout loud enough to the right people about what we're doing. So it gets up to a certain level, but it's getting higher than that level into the sort of strategic and policy sort of areas, that's where we fall down. So we're trying to address that now ... But in the longer term, our aim is to get much more embedded into where we fit into the policy, or make a policy become written to fit into with what we're doing, if you like ... Often these people who are writing policies haven't a clue about what's been going on on the ground. And it's frightening. And they all say: "What a great idea!"
> …But to some extent we have sort of tenuous links with a few people, but we want really, to be seen to be the vehicle for a lot of food access projects to happen...'

Continuing:
> 'We've always had loose connections with PCTs [Primary Care Trusts] across the region ... The longer term hope is that we would get service level agreements with PCTs to actually deliver work that we actually want to do, but within their particular areas ... it's just getting that sort of message known to the policymakers. I mean I don't know enough about policy people to be honest to be sort of definite. I don't know how it works, it's a sort of black magic, isn't it?" (social enterprise, 2009)

However, by 2015 this 'black magic' and uncertainty still reflected the challenge to food related policy however by this latter date through the emergence of a food charter and the range of organisations signed up to it and the activities of Food Newcastle the power relations and momentum for change had subtly shifted, yet ultimate control of the food policy agenda was deemed to lay with the local city authority. This is perhaps best illustrated by an open Council meeting held in the city on sustainable and affordable food in June 2014 (Newcastle City Council, 2014) however while clearly subscribing to the values of the Charter there was no publicly evident change in the approaches to food policy from the Council following the meeting.

The position relayed by an actor within Food Newcastle was that: "there was no rhyme or reason about how a [policy] decision is made" and "who makes policy is unclear". Thus, while they recognised the local authority "as crucial partners to this work" they were "via Cabinet trying to develop a formal relationship between Food Newcastle and the Council" this needed someone on the Council to take the lead, as to date they had been highly dependent on "the integral support of [a few] Councillors" to help take forward the food charter's objectives and specific initiatives. However, not all Councillors were aware of their existence and aims. The organisation was also alert to the fact that they had been supported by consecutive Directors of Public Health but that they were aware of "the tensions in relationships between Council departments" that they were working with. Even

though their funding "had not been prescriptive in generating public health outcomes" there was a greater awareness of the "multifunctional nature of health" as much as food as a facilitator of health outcomes by respective Directors. Moreover, the participant reflected a strong level of frustration that they were not able to feed into key debates or approached as consultees, even though they were in discussion with the Council on different issues. This reaffirms the political nature of food policy development and the challenge of working within pre-existing remits and structures.

4.4   Communication

Throughout Food Newcastle's documents it was stated that they were "a voice for food". The importance of "being a creditable, recognised voice" was constantly reiterated throughout interview with the organisation's representative and in public meetings and documents. While stating that they "had a long way to go" to achieve this the participant reflected that "they needed to have buy in" and credibility to have trust placed in them, but to achieve this they were in constant "two way conversations" with a range of actors, the problem being how much attention to give to one issue could mean "letting something else slide" and in turn disengaging possible partners and individuals if they were to attempt to "support all those voices". The publication of Newcastle's Food Charter was a "public declaration" of what a food policy looks like. However, Newcastle "still haven't got the Council taking a strategic approach to food policy so [we] can't feed in". Thus once, again there is the issue of finding the right arena or space within which to voice the aspiration of a food policy, but also to change the perceived institutional structures and boundaries as a participant from Food Newcastle stated that it was difficult because the actors they were trying reach perceived that "responsibility lies elsewhere" and so they had to become "more vocal". This issue being that while they needed 'top-down' support they also required additional support and demands to be made by the general public to help "bring it [food policy] up the agenda".

The most recent development at the time of writing was in July 2015 the recommendation by the Director of Public Health for Newcastle to "Develop an effective full city food policy" (DPH, 2015, p.38) and that the "city as a whole needs to have a more coherent approach to food and healthy eating, particularly for the most vulnerable" (ibid, p.37). Hence, while the idea of a food policy has been raised and the recommendation subsequently adopted, it remains embedded within public health and particularly obesity and healthy eating concerns and associated discourses, even though local sourcing and procurement were considered alongside this primarily for hospital food. The Council's Wellbeing for life Board in relation to the Director of Pubic Health's recommendations had "Discussed the recommendations, nothing that they had now been adopted by city council as part of its approach to wellbeing and public health improvement in the city" (Newcastle City Council, 2015). Consequently, there remains a constraint on the potential discursive stretch (Torfing, 2001) and broader linkages that may be needed to initiate change and creation of a food policy for the city, that reaches beyond public health areas.

5.   Conclusions

The paper and its exploratory focus on activities by actors within the city of Newcastle has identified the following points of interest:
1.   The role of external actors (e.g. funding, government targets, SCFN network, evaluation mechanisms) in stimulating local food-related policy initiatives, even through the external

actors may change over time the appropriateness and awareness of food may be more continuous than at first appears.

2. The past paths and linkages to existing policy areas and associated support (i.e. public health) appear to be initial facilitators of food policy debates within existing policymaking structures but also potentially act to constrain the frames of reference through their association with other more powerful discourses of obesity and the associated actions food-based policy measures. This may be a further reproduction of the taken for grantedness and internalised discourses of food and policy issues and arenas associated it.

3. A discourse of food policy and its associated breadth has not yet stretched the existing health related discourses to generate further change, but this may be part of a gradual as opposed to radical evolution of food policy in this particular urban context which may act as a basis for further change.

4. This may reflect the logic of appropriateness as well as path dependency associated with sociological and historical new institutionalism. However, the use and associated practices of discourses can offer a means of investigating the possible change and evolution of policy developments.

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