



Outside the axis of knowledge production: Exploring the representation of East European informal food practices in Western academia

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What are those East Europeans playing at over there? Are they so lazy that they can't even go to the (food) shop?

Editorial: With pride on the fingers in the soil

Artist: Urmas Nemvalts

Postimees daily, Estonia, 8 June 2019

- Long-term interest in sustainable consumption, food.....garden food production seemed fairly sustainable and ‘relocalised’
- Joe Smith’s and my observations of Polish and Czech food self-provisioning (home gardening) in the mid—2000s did not correspond with accounts written by Western academics
- No consideration of these practices’ sustainability at all – instead the economy firmly in focus
- Puzzle: the economic framing of these practices
- We set out to investigate
- First outcome: 2007 TIBG article began to question this framing

Stories around food, politics and change in
Poland and the Czech Republic

Joe Smith and Petr Jehlička





- The latest result of this endeavour – 2020 co-authored paper in Journal of Rural Studies
- In the intervening decade – involvement in FSP research based on combination of large-scale surveys (N=1000) & interviews
- Form a diversity of angles to show that East European FSP is a widespread and social resilience, food security, sustainability, food re-localization, social cohesion & cooperation - supporting set of social practices
- -> a set of practices compatible with central tenets of Alternative Food Networks (AFNs)

Thinking food like an East European: A critical reflection on the framing of food systems

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Headline findings on East European FSP



- **Widespread** - in Hungary 36%, Czechia 38%, Poland 54%, Croatia 50% of population grows food
- **Socially diverse** – people from all educational and occupational backgrounds grow food (58% Poles with primary education and 55% with university degrees grow food)
- **Evenly distributed across class and economic status** (but: more middle than working class activity: Poland 55% middle; 51% working; Czechia middle 43% and working 37%)
- **Generous activity** – many growers share their produce with others (Czechia 60% and Poland 40%) – with family, friends, neighbours...

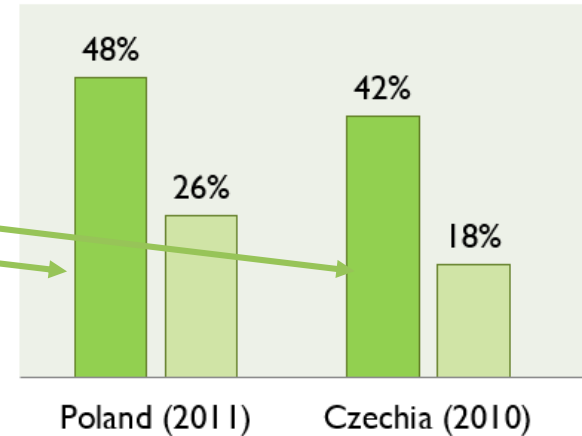
Sources: Smith & Jehlička (2013); Smith, Kostelecký & Jehlička (2015), Ančić, Domazet & Župarić-Iljić (2019)

Headline findings on East European FSP

Country/ year	2003	2005	2009	2010	2011	2013	2015	2018
Bulgaria	50							
Croatia								50
Czechia	30	42	43	43			38	
Hungary	45					36		
Poland	38				54			

% of population growing food

■ population %



- Nearly ½ of Polish and Czech food growers produce non-certified organic food
- Strong food relocalisation (the shortest food chain garden → kitchen)
- Importantly – EE FSP has remained stable while societies have become richer

Sources: Smith & Jehlička (2013); Smith, Kostelecký & Jehlička (2015), Ančić, Domazet & Župarić-Iljić (2019)

Headline findings on East European FSP

- In Czech food-growing households:

- 41% of vegetables
- 40% of fruits
- 38% of eggs come from non-market sources (growing and sharing) (2015)



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- Czech general population (both food-growing and non-growing households considered):

- 20% of all vegetables, fruits, potatoes and eggs consumed in Czech households are either directly produced by the household or received as a gift

- UK households (2014):

- FSP and sharing accounted for: 3% of fresh fruit and vegetables and 5% of eggs

Important: motivations for EE FSP

- healthy, fresh food & a hobby
- economic motivation / financial saving – secondary consideration

Source: Smith & Jehlička (2013); Smith, Kostelecký & Jehlička (2015)

An ideal form of relocalized, sustainable food system?

- What has emerged from our investigation - an almost ideal form of:
 - socially diverse, embedded and routinised food related behaviours
 - compatible with activists' and scholars' ideas about transformations towards sustainable food systems
- Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) model
- BUT: it was not how East European FSP was represented in international scholarship
- until the 2010s produced almost exclusively by Western researchers
- no attempts to include insights from this research to inform internationally recognized theorizations on sustainable food alternatives



Circulation of knowledge on East European FSP within development & area studies

- instead, Western scholars studying these practices uniformly framed them as stories of survival, coping, hardship, poverty & underdevelopment
- → difficult to expect knowledge on practices associated with negative connotations to inspire others
- In addition:
 - knowledge on East European FSP circulated within the subfield of 'East European area studies' - little impact on general social scientific knowledge
 - reluctance to incorporate knowledge from Eastern Europe into 'global knowledges' (Suchland 2011)

Article titles:

- **Back to Basics:** Households food production in Russia
- You can **buy almost anything with potatoes:** examination of barter during **economic crisis** in Bulgaria
- Russian **Poverty: Muddling through** economic transition with **garden plots**

No of citations of 14 frequently cited articles on East European household food production (1993 – 2010) by Web of Science citation areas in 2015

East European knowledge does not ‘travel’ beyond East European area studies.....

TABLE 2 Fourteen frequently cited articles on East European household food production published between 1993 and 2010

Citation area	No. of citations	%
<u>Postsocialist area studies (incl. transition, postsocialist agriculture, economic development...)</u>	184	71.6
General economics, economic geography, social anthropology	73	28.4
Total	257	100

Average number of citations per article was 18.4; the number of citations ranged from 6 to 49 and 44 self-citations were excluded (Web of Science, 24 March 2015).

‘The structure of knowledge production grants power and authority to only a very few places’ → this ‘determines which knowledge travels most effectively and thus gains status as “theory”’ (Robinson, 2011: 126-127)

- No intention to deny achievements or benefits of Western scholarship for analyses of food system in Eastern Europe and other contexts
- But also need to recognize the importance of knowledge from peripheries including Eastern Europe for the sake of
 - more comprehensive academic knowledge and
 - greater academic equality

Academic equality

SIR -- "If top universities truly want to be seen to lead the field in sex equality . . .": so *Nature* on 27 May (363, 288, 1993). But surely what is needed is equality of opportunity. One may hope that this will lead to equality of achievement, but possibly it may not, and it cannot be taken for granted that the two must be the same.

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NATURE · VOL 364 · 8 JULY 1993

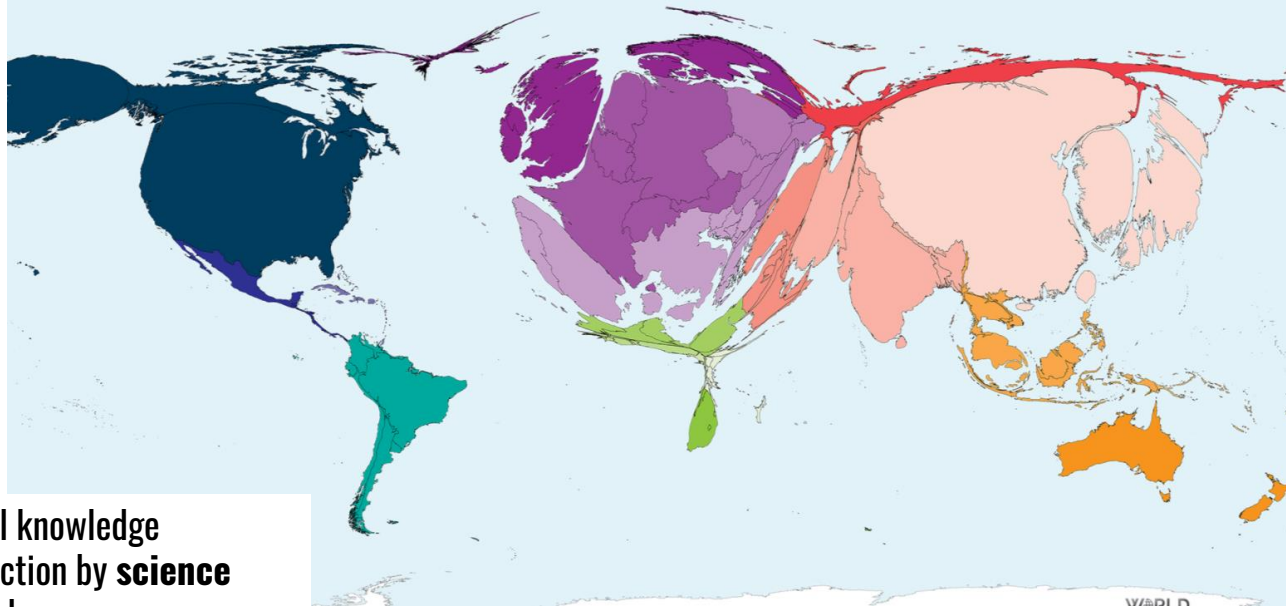
Why does all this matter?

- Why does all this matter? Why is it important to understand this ‘missed opportunity’ or ‘lessons from Eastern Europe that have not been learnt’?
- 1. The gravity of global environmental crisis to which the mainstream Northern food system contributes requires searching for responses in all social contexts, not just in the West / centre where the conventional notion of sustainability was coined
- 2. Need to find ways of making the flow of scholarly communication multidirectional as opposed to the unidirectional West → the Rest (East, South....) flow



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Marginalization of knowledge from non-Western contexts



Territory size is proportional to the number of scientific journal articles published in 2016

Global knowledge production by **science** journals
...social science and humanities excluded...

Source: Worldmapper
[Science Papers Published 2016 | Worldmapper](#)

- Marginalization of knowledge from non-Western contexts usually considered in relation to:
 - The extra-scientific factors - the inadequate material infrastructure in many non-Western contexts
 - The intra-scientific factors - the unequal international division of labour – that scholars in the South and in Western periphery face in attempts to produce internationally accepted theory

Eastern Europe as a source of theorizations on alternative food systems?

- Need to expand the scope of these debates in the direction of the importance of representation:
 - exploring the marginalization of knowledge concerning East European FSP that was produced by Western scholars
- Whether knowledge on a social practice / behaviour such as FSP is considered for transfer to different social contexts to those in which it was originally explored (i.e. whether it becomes theory) partly depends on the way it is represented

East European FSP – a fitting topic to explore neglect of theorizations from non-Western contexts



- East European FSP is a fitting topic for exploring why knowledge produced in East European periphery is neglected in social science theorizations
- EE FSP is a prime example of a research topic on which East European societies ‘harbour valuable lessons useful in the face of an intense development crisis that combines environmental and social facets’ (Domazet and Marinović Jerolimov, 2014: 20)
- Tendency in Western academia to relegate this research to the category of area studies, where it contributes little beyond empirical detail for Westerners to theorize with
- This talk’s contention: FOUR underlying factors for this neglect

Factor 1 - The othering of Eastern Europe: the region as a perennial learner and recipient

- Eastern Europe portrayed as ‘not yet European’, as ‘the Other against which Western Europe has long narrated its own civilization and progress’ (Müller 2018)
- Two hundred years of ‘advice’ flowing from West to East (Wolff 1994)
- Popular strand of research: how East European societies receive and ‘learn’ AFNs initiatives imported from the West in their role as passive recipients of Western sustainability agendas (Mincyte 2012)
- Two effects of this approach:
 - a) obscures the diversity of food practices in Eastern Europe
 - b) prioritises a marginal set of practices over the more prevalent ones

Factor 2 – Food self-provisioning as a sign of East European residuality and non-modernity

- In the developmentalist perspective, the post-1989 transformation of Eastern Europe seen as a unidirectional process of development from a non-market to a market, from an informal to a formal economy, and from defensive strategies to entrepreneurialism i.e. tradition → modernity
- Disappointment in some academic circles that East European household food growers refused to transform into commercial farming (equated with development)
- the European East was simultaneously viewed as a) on the slow linear development path and b) as stuck in time (retrospective markers ‘ex-Soviet’ and ‘old Eastern Bloc’ [Müller 2018])

The future is foretold, it is not open....

‘The multiplicities of the spatial have been rendered as merely stages in the temporal queue’ (Massey, 2005: 71)

Factor 3 – The economization of social science research on Eastern Europe (including on FSP)

- The focus on poverty, shortage, and scarcity – Factor 3 that prevented EE FSP practices from being reframed as inspiring, innovative, and transferrable to other contexts
- East European developments in social sciences read through the economist lens - traced to influential neo-institutionalist analyses and to the concept of ‘shortage economy’ (Hungarian-American economist János Kornai [Thelen, 2011])
- Image of millions of East European households producing their food during the 1990s economic collapse linked to survival strategies of the poor
- Contrast: In studies of FSP in the ‘Western core’ after the mid-2000s these practices removed from the ‘passive’, backward-looking framings



János Kornai

Factor 4 – Eastern Europe – a social context outside the theory-generating axis?

- from the Western perspective, East European informal food networks = an impediment to market developments rather than a sign of social resilience, innovation and creativity (as in the West)
- Also: ‘unlike in the South, people have not found in the East [...] a source of alternatives to neoliberalism [and] environmental destruction’ (Müller 2018) → in contrast to the South, the East has not become a valued source of a multiplicity of knowledge
- This points to the need to consider the **position of Eastern Europe** in relation to **the axis that marks the places where theoretically valid knowledge is created**
- Eastern Europe’s location outside the axis that connects the former metropolises with former colonies in the circuits of internationally recognized knowledge (theory)

Factor 4 – Eastern Europe – a social context outside the theory-generating axis?

- two decades of sustained efforts to postcolonially provincialize the ‘centre’ have partly succeeded →
- → while the West has retained its status as the primary theory-generating centre, the range of social contexts has been extended to include knowledge from the former colonies
- Tauri Tuvikene’s (2016) observation about the ‘double exclusion’ of Eastern Europe from the processes of knowledge generation:

The region is located ‘nowhere’, as it tends to be viewed simultaneously as neither the centre nor the periphery, neither the mainstream nor part of the critique.

Factor 4 – Eastern Europe – a social context outside the theory-generating axis?

- claims that ‘the structure of knowledge production grants power and authority to only a very few places’ and that this ‘determines which knowledge travels most effectively and thus gains status as “theory”’ (Robinson, 2011: 126-127) needs to be modified →
- → The structure of knowledge production also gives these “places” the power to select which contexts outside the core will be included in the set of theory-generating social settings
- the long-term Western research on East European everyday practices such as FSP and sharing has failed to produce the kind of novel concepts

“In the global circulation of signs, the East is not nearly as legible as the Global South, where colonialism has created shared languages, institutions, knowledge systems and social bonds. Uganda is more easily knowable in the global centres of media and scholarship than Ukraine, Chile is more familiar than Czechia and Laos is closer than Latvia.” (Müller 2020)

- **Looking at how East European FSP has been read from the West is instructive for understanding the obstacles to efforts to shift Eastern Europe from the bottom of the hierarchy of knowledge generating spaces**
- **It shows how the persistent hierarchy of knowledge-generating contexts can continue even when findings from non-Western settings have good potential to extend knowledge in a particular field**
- **Location of Eastern Europe outside the axis of theory production is an important factor in marginalization of knowledge on informal food practices**

- Sustainable practices such as FSP do not necessarily disappear with greater affluence
- → important lessons on the enmeshing of informal food practices with rapid marketization (significant findings for societies such as post-Soviet countries or China and Vietnam)
- Scholarship on East European FSP invites us to think about sustainability in novel ways:
 - To include informal, everyday, non-market forms of behaviour and consider how they fit in and interact with market-based forms of sustainable consumption
 - To extend the notion of sustainable food systems beyond those based on consumptive behaviour driven by ethical concerns

- Scholarship on East European FSP invites us to think about sustainability in novel ways:
 - To go beyond intentionality of sustainable behaviour to include ‘sustainability by outcome rather than intention’ (‘quiet sustainability’)
 - To extend the notion of sustainability beyond those based on constraints and limitations -
 - to include sustainable behaviours that are associated with joy and exuberance
 - To consider implications of a possible loss of existing informal food practices for sustainability → marketisation, longer food supply chains...(we usually think of sustainability as developing something new, creative, innovative, technology-based...)



Spaces of Quiet
Sustainability

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THANK YOU



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