

Agricultural produce sits on a market stand in Rome next to a merchant's phone, with updates on Mali's Armed Forces (FAMA) [Antonio Umberto Mosetti]

The Re-Globalisation of Food Systems: Reframing Global Processes and Relations of Scale through the Lens of Food

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Food production and consumption have indubitably been one of the defining aspects of globalization and of the very possibility of conceptualizing the ideas behind it. With regard to the latest stages of globalization and, more importantly, its future, the topic of food interconnections can provide a useful lens for responding to the challenge posed by the five “Rs” of Re-globalisation (Benedikter and Kofler 2019) to help us reframe and revision globalization.

From its onset, globalization has been built on the possibility of drawing wildly distant production and consumption sites. Marxist historian and anthropologist Sidney Mintz, in 1985’s Sweetness and Power, famously traces the modern trade of sugarcane and sugar as one of the main processes that shaped a truly global commercial system, a foundation for subsequent globalization, as well as globally widespread consumption fashions and tastes (Mintz 1985). Also, many technological advancements have been pursued and made possible with regard to food, efficient transportation of perishable goods, and the replication of farming techniques and crops in contexts far and different from the original ones. It is indeed food around which processes of globalization have received much political and cultural pushback and resistance, around the world. First of all, the unequal relationships upon which globalization - and the globalization of food - was built already was not lost on Mintz,

who clearly fleshed out how certain areas of the world have been able to quite literally feed on the labor of people in other, far away places. Then, much attention has been rightfully drawn to the environmental impact of long-distance trade in general. Food has a specific place in these issues, as not only is it shipped and preserved to much use of energy and pollution, but the need for large production of goods in poorer areas of the world for the sustenance of better-off countries has oftentimes created issues of land pollution, deforestation, erosion, desertification, and flooding. The whole world has been shook in this sense by the Covid pandemic, which unequivocally brought out the issues of current human productive practices and the health risk component of global connections and exchanges, for what concerns differential standards in terms of the use of chemical tools and pesticides, food and sea pollution, and a number of other issues.



Niger's military-government supporters take part in a demonstration in front of a French army base in the capital Niamey [File: Mahamadou Hamidou/Reuters]

Food is also often utilized in some of the main political and cultural (as well as economic) push backs against globalization processes. Issues of food sovereignty have been rightfully claimed by countries who are dependent on others for basic sustenance. Of course, incentives for the local production of food, with the goal of self-sustenance, have always been crucial for development policies, but are now coming back to light in new ways..This can be seen inthe Sahel among the recent wave of coup d’etats in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and beyond. These countries have recently become driven by like-minded juntas which deployed anti-European and

anti-Western actions, sanctions and sentiments and chased French and US-American military forces from their territories, turning instead to Russia for alliance (Husaini 2024). Far from a binary polarization of the world, or submission to Russia's would-be imperial power, the new Sahelian regimes look for what they see as more equal compensation for their resources (mainly gold, rare earths and uranium - the key to France's "miraculous" success with nuclear energy) in the shape of grain and for the capacity to maintain their whole population in the face of the environmental impoverishment of their lands. This example speaks to how much food production and consumption are constantly at stake in the relationship between local scales and realities and global processes.

Let us then look to food production and consumption as lenses for a response to the call of re-globalisation, for the observation of contemporary globalization, the redefinition of its processes and reframing of its impact and challenges. First of all, food, its networks and value chains, its politics and its culture can easily fit into some of the more widespread explanations for the current phase of globalization. Reflections on de-globalisation underscore how institutions and politics are the main cause for the contraction of global exchange (Antràs 2020). Pol Antràs analyzes global trade and globalization in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic, and concludes that such an event would contribute to slowing globalization only in its impact on public policy and political choices. In this scenario, worldwide consumers' "return to markets" and new local sensibilities - and globally widespread attention to the local dimensions of sustenance - become of extreme interest and consequence, together with larger scale inclinations towards the shape of socio-economic development and international relations. Thus, looking through food and its economies and politics can be revealing of the actual flesh of contemporary globalization, its mechanisms and its differential intensities, especially in the relationship between local and global dimensions. Let us here reflect on the possible lines of inquiry which open up when food is taken as the key for the analysis of local-global relationships. Especially, cities, local markets and food systems become laboratories where one can locally explore the workings of global processes.

Ethnographic research in Rome, Italy, can work as a fitting example for the potentialities of such a way of looking at globalization. Anthropological fieldwork, brought out between 2021 and 2024 between urban markets and the countryside, has followed the work of a social cooperative made of migrants from the Sahel and self-employed in the growing and distribution of agricultural produce. First of all,

much work has been done on how global cities exist only because of their relation with secondary cities. Minor cities and rural areas are counted on to feed bigger urban centers, and are in turn maintained by them; they represent what is called “spaces of inconspicuous globalization”, where multiple kinds of rationales overlap, often opposed to each other: those ‘from above’ of the many institutional, public and private actors and ‘from below’ of transnational entrepreneurs (Choplin and Pliez 2015). This can be true within a countries’ borders, but is especially interesting when looking at international value chains, when many small centers grow - even if they do not always thrive - according only to their role in feeding huge global cities, in a complex metabolic relation. Indeed, Roman urban food markets reveal themselves as sites where the size and weight as a global city is built through a widespread net that is absolutely powered by local realities, and which politically and culturally take strength from this quality.

Furthermore, these markets become sites where narratives about the local qualities of food clash with global value chains, where the very global spread of sensibilities regarding food contrast and oppose global productive systems. Indeed, observing consumption patterns in late globalization strikes for how different aspects of globalization interact with each other. In this context, the presence of a growing attention for the origin and treatment of agricultural produce is clear, as is the awareness of the environmental effects of pesticide use and long-distance food shipping; consumers contribute to a global sensibility regarding food which preferentially demands biological, closely produced items. Of course, this very attention is a reaction to global issues, and travels through borders and thanks to global technologies, while being in friction with the fundamental economic dimension of globalization.



One of the trucks owned by Sahelian migrant workers in Rome, parked by the marketplace where they work. The workers travel daily between Rome and the countryside, and their trucks materially connect the two spaces. [Antonio Umberto Mosetti]

Another extremely interesting aspect that such a fieldwork brings to life is the complex - almost paradoxical - reality of the actors involved. Indeed, in Rome, workers from Africa contribute to the production of Roman products, to the satisfaction of the same customers as above and to their preference for the local provenance of their food. These contradictions also bring out the issue of a differential relationship to locality as a value: while for many people in richer countries, it is possible to enact and practice a strong relationship to the local dimension of their lives, poorer areas of the world depend on mobility and unequal relations with other places. This directs our reflection towards the persistence of globalization in localities which would apparently be tied to local values. Contrary to

Sassen (Sassen 1996), this confirms a view where these are not global sites of production; instead, the concrete place still matters, at least as the position in global commodity chains, and is indeed conducive in shaping such relative positions.

To conclude, food and its local dimensions offer promise for the re-conceptualisation of globalization. Benedikter and Kofler challenge us to reframe globalization, to adapt it “to new power constellations and changing overall contexts”; the issues we outlined direct us towards the new mechanisms that connect the choices of political actors at every level to technological change and differentials of economic exchange between countries. These objects also give outlooks for answering the challenge to a revision of globalization - a reconsideration of its persistence. Indeed, they force us to re-conceptualise the connections between globalization processes at different scales and their effects, focusing especially on how people at smaller scales are impacted by the changing mechanisms and scenarios.

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