
Homemade Matters: Logics of Opposition in a Failed Food Swap

Connor Fitzmaurice¹ and Juliet B. Schor²

¹Boston University ²Boston College

ABSTRACT

A rich literature on commensuration and standards of evaluation has yielded important findings on how items are valued. Over the course of a two-year ethnography, we witnessed one effort to create a new economic practice, a monthly swap of •homemade foodŽ, start

: money; inequality; evaluation; circuits of commerce; sharing economy.

On a Sunday afternoon, in a neighborhood of a large Northeastern city filled with revitalized warehouses and warehouses, a group of approximately 20 people gather in a rented room. The action begins with participants walking around and sampling foods, followed by a silent auction as people make offers for exchanges. After all the bids are entered, trades begin. No money will change hands, but so food will circulate throughout the group.

This is a typical scene at the Northeastern Food Swap, an informal •sharing economyŽ initiative that has operated since 2011. Food swaps began in Brooklyn in 2010 and quickly spread. In 2012, 123 swaps were reported across the United States and Canada (Wanada et al. 2013). Food swapping is a type of activity that economic sociologists have called a •circuit of commerce,Ž a concept developed by Viviana Zelizer (2002, 2010) to describe economic exchanges and social relations that are neither traditional firms nor markets. Over the course of a two-year ethnography, we observed our research site devolve into a failed attempt at what we have called a •circuit in constructionŽ (Schor, and Carfagna 2014), an attempt to create a

this swap struggled to establish itself as a viable site of either economic exchange or social connection. By the end of the second year, it was barely functioning.

As barter economies, food swaps represent an attempt to remove some food provisioning from the cash market, with swappers adhering to a relatively fixed one-to-one exchange ratio: a jar of jam yields a jar of pickles. The lack of cash makes this an unusual case as relational economic sociologists have primarily analyzed situations where cash enters areas of social life. These studies reveal context-specific, relationally determined meanings of exchange, and challenge classical views of money as a universal leveling agent (Zelizer 1989). By examining a site where individuals have removed money from exchange, and where social networks

or services within a circuit, it is not functioning effectively. In our analysis, we consider successful and unsuccessful transactions, illuminating the competing logics underlying participants' actions. Second, circuits are distinguishable by their strongly social nature (Zelizer 2010). If a circuit is unable to routinely foster desired social relations, its success is jeopardized.

Moreover, this particular circuit represented an effort to construct an alternative economy of food provisioning. As a result, this failed case reveals a set of conditions under which oppositional identities do not generate strong categorical definitions and, perhaps more importantly, clear criteria for

swap could be sampled during the event and forgotten. Although she thought it was exciting to get to try a delicious homemade truffle at the swap, it was just a treat. When she was considering trade partners she was looking for something that she could use in her daily life. Items like jam, pickle

many people who are actually, literally farmers. Eating local food was cast as a way of gaining access to the valorized experiences of others. As a result, items like a homemade grape jelly made from grapes the participant grew in their own backyard, or even a simple basil pesto made with homegrown basil, were very popular.

Participants also liked to trade for items they thought were more interesting than what they could find in the grocery store or would think to make themselves. One regular swapper routinely advised newcomers to avoid items that anyone could make. I wouldn't recommend bringing brownies, she would say, I mean, unless they are like the best brownies ever. But everyone here can make brownies if they want them. Far from efficiently using excess homemade food, homemade food was reimagined as something made in the home especially for the swap. At the annual holiday cookie swap, we asked the regulars how they would decide among the hundreds of cookies. Almost all indicated that would trade for something interesting or not just your average chocolate chip. Popular items at regularly scheduled swaps were plum vermouth jam, a sweet tomato basil jelly, or a blood orange cocktail mixer.

In talking to members about what they looked for in a good trade, time and again a lime marmalade from one of the first events was cited as the ideal item. Homemade food had to be distinctive yet conceivably part of one's routine life and cookery, consistent with theories of two-stage valuation that emphasize the advantage of broad conformity within a category along with seemingly authentic distinctiveness (Suckerman 2016). The lime marmalade became the benchmark of a good trade because it represented an item that could be consumed simply and repeatedly with breakfast and is something seemingly anyone could produce. At the same time, it was both involved and innovative enough that very few people would actually make it.

The Collapse of the Food Swap

In its early months, when we began studying it, the swap was thriving. On the heels of a positive report in a local newspaper, attendance was high, averaging 25 to 30 participants. The organizers were self-funding the swap, paying to rent a room in a co-working space that served as an incubator for area nonprofits in a gentrifying neighborhood. After a year, participation began to lag (see Figure 1). Swaps were drawing eight to ten participants, and the organizers were tiring of paying for the space. They relocated to a different co-working office across town in another trendy neighborhood filled with boutique shops and restaurants. The first swap in the new location only drew a handful of participants, largely the eight



Figure 1 A Food Swap's Decline: Changing Attendance Rates and Composition

First-timers would often leave saying things like, "at least now we know what not to make," or "at least someone wanted my food." They struggled with the lack of clarity about what was valued as homemade food. Most would not return.

Participants often brought different understandings of the purpose of the swap, leading to contradictory expectations that stifled long-term membership. These mismatches in understandings a

- 1 Such problems are certainly not unique to our case. While maintaining an online presence, the Northeast Indiana Food swap ceased operation after struggling to retain members, despite ample press coverage, publicity, and outreach. The problem received attention in a recent book targeting would-be swappers and swap organizers, highlighting the struggles many swaps have to retain members, and suggesting membership fees as a way of possibly instilling commitment (Pastore 2016) (

contributed to the instability of the circuit, as swappers drew boundaries between themselves and those who were operating with different motives. A more fundamental problem was the presence of competing standards of evaluation. Our data demonstrate the ways in which actors, who were remarkably homogenous in terms of gender, race, and cultural capital, drew on often-contradictory cultural logics to assess potential exchanges.

These evaluations were predicated on negative criteria, shaped by logics that devalued qualities and practices of the broader food system as undesirable or problematic. However, many of these negative criteria are multivalent: the binary oppositions underlying them have multiple



Figure 2. Threading the Needle of Oppositions: The Case of the Coveted Lime Marmalade

Notes Dotted lines signal common erroneous assumptions of acceptability swappers made navigating these oppositions, while only the central pathway contains the narrow set of characteristics able to reconcile the competing logics of opposition swappers employed. While organized as linear for clarity, these logics operate concurrently in the swap. For example, a unique item might ultimately be rejected as too artisanal.

my friend doesn't eat any processed foods. She only eats things, that she makes completely herself (emphasis added).

At the same time, swappers frequently rejected foods too alternative. To be sure, swap participants wanted healthful, sustainable alternatives to industrial foods. They were opposed to

DISCUSSION

We have offered the case of the Northeastern Food Swap as a first example in the literature on circuits of a failed circuit, in which individuals tried to establish a circuit as an alternative economy, but the economic and social relationships proved unsustainable. While we might expect food swap participants to have clear expectations of what belonged within the familiar category of •homemade (Fiske and Taylor 1996), our findings reveal the extent to which competing standards of evaluation can proliferate in oppositional contexts, even amongst a homogeneous group attempting to transact in relatively familiar domains. Oppositional logics have been shown to promote strong category definitions and identities (Carroll and Swaminathan 2006), providing •a diagnosis of the deficits of the existing system, a prognosis of what an alternative should look like, and a motivation for action (Weber et al. 2005). Such oppositions allow for positive framings of the proposed alternative across salient evaluative criteria (Weber et al. 2008).

In this case, oppositional logics did not perform this function. Contradictory standards emerged in a context characterized by multiple binaries of opposition: food swappers simultaneously opposed the industrial food system and its highly artisanal alternatives. Like participants in other alternative food systems, members opposed the practices of agro-industry. They desired more ecologically sustainable consumption and valorized an aesthetic of sustainability (Daly et al. 2014). Motivated solely by such concerns, trading true •leftoversŽ would have been an appropriate expression of this logic. However, a sustainable DIY ethos may be fundamentally incompatible with the foodie quest for novel, exotic flavors and ingredients that required participants to create something special for fellow swappers. At the same time, while swap members valued creativity, they frequently opposed framings of alternative food as artisanal (Brifston and Baumann 2007), rejecting offerings that were too creative. Instead, they viewed food as an everyday commodity that people could provide for themselves, indicative of the increasingly productive, DIY-nature of consumption (Samuel et al. 2014). Kneese, Rosenblat and Boyd (2010), few participants could consistently match the skills and training required for successful DIY craft production. In the crucible of an exchange setting like the food swap, where these logics provided the basis not only for audience reception but also economic valuation, these contradictions were acutely realized.

Our research revealed the polysemic, often contradictory nature of what •homemadeŽ food meant for swappers. It was not simply food made by hand in the home as a part of one's daily life. It needed to be seasonal, local, or natural, without being expected, parochial, or too •crunchy.Ž It could not be something swappers would ordinarily prepare in their day-to-day lives, but it also could not be something swappers wouldn't imagine using in their daily lives. It could be something that swappers had to transform into something else in their own kitchens (like a flavored cocktail syrup), but it couldn't be something that would take too much effort to transform (like a sourdough starter). It needed to be healthy, without being too alternative. It needed to be everyday, without being mundane. Swappers needed to weave their way through a web of negative criteria to be successful. In the end, although it wasn't a null set, the number of acceptable characteristics was rather small.

One solution would have been to make the criteria for successful offerings clear, on the website, the frequent blogs that one founder posted, or via a brochure. Swap members even suggested this to the founders. However, a fundamental basis of the swap's alternative identity was its formal openness.

- 2 The atmosphere of the highly successful BK Swappers group, located in Brooklyn, stands in sharp contrast to the Northeastern Food Swaps opposition to homemade food being framed as •artisanal.Ž Several artisanal food businesses have gotten their start through their events (Raster 2016). One participant remarked:

Big agriculture, mega-stores, and corporate owned farms aren't going to die, but they will make way for a good size section of the American population that has a greater care for the food they consume than the masses. Enter the artisanal food producer. BK Swappers exemplifies Brooklyn's role as a cornerstone in a wide-sweeping revolution in how food is produced, obtained, and even thought about. Brooklyn firmly has its place in the •Roots of the New Artisanal MovementŽ (Brooklyn Bell 2012).

to all would-be participants. Would defining •homemadeŽ food too clearly stifle the ethic of openness and the empowerment to take back one’s pantry that the swap hoped to promote? Many food swaps across the United States have similarly vague instructions. In fact, we found that many other swap websites replicate the instructions offered by our own. The failure to make expectations more transparent suggests that opacity is almost a fundamental feature of the swap: a consequence of the oppositional logics that dominated criteria for acceptable items and their intersection with the positive qualities sought by foodies.

As participants drew on these often-contradictory logics, competing boundaries of inclusion and exclusion developed, leading to membership instability, discontent, and eventually, collapse. Even when participants could identify what made an item popular, consistently producing items that could generate trades and balance these competing standards proved difficult. Inability to balance these logics and appeal to the sensibilities of other participants made newcomers feel unwelcome. For longtime members, month after month these difficulties led to frustration, either because they were dissatisfied with their own offerings or those from other swappers. One lesson is that the proliferation of competing logics of evaluation in a circuit can lead to the proliferation of justifications for members’ and would-be-members’ exclusion.

The absence of money, and the exchange structure of the swap, also contributed to the failure to make trades. Cash was never introduced into the swap as a medium of exchange, as it was considered taboo in this barter setting. We suspect that if there were an option to pay in cash, or even a swap-specific currency, that the symbolic qualities of the goods may have been incorporated into a system of valuation less conspicuously linked to individual members’ judgments. With cash or scrip, goods deemed symbolically inferior might have been purchased for small amounts and highly valued products could have commanded high prices. This is a kind of Simmelian (1978) position where money becomes merely a quantifiable value, eliding subjective valuations. The paradox is that the introduction of money might have led to more social relations, via ongoing trades and repeat attendance. The absence may have resulted in exaggerated reliance on aesthetic signifiers of shared categorical understandings as a mode of evaluation.

This trend was exacerbated by the swap’s adherence to an informal but strong convention that items should trade on a one item-to-one item basis. One jar of jam should be equivalent to a bag of granola. From a standard economic perspective, this equivalence is irrational. Cost, in labor time and materials, is not equivalent across items. However, we rarely saw this convention violated in practice and those few times were when founders would make •charityŽ trades, taking multiple items in exchange for one of their own from a newcomer who was unable to find trading partners. In interviews, people repeatedly mentioned the convention that a pint jar was the basis of equivalence. Even when there were no pint jars involved, the expectation was that amounts would be roughly equal to what fits in a pint jar and that the effort involved in production would be roughly equal to that involved in making a pint of jam. If there were a flexible exchange rate it might have led to more trades, as people

CONCLUSION

Our findings suggest the complementarity and utility of concepts drawn from organizational sociology for understanding the conditions under which circuits succeed, particularly when they are created de novo to foster more equitable, alternative economies. Far from familiar categories, like homemade food, taking on increasingly settled standards of evaluation, as prevailing theories in organizational and economic sociology predict, within some circuits logics of action drawn from broader cultural fields sustain competing and opaque standards of evaluation. At the boundaries of food swap circuits we witnessed the careful imagining and reimagining of even the most seemingly obvious category homemade food, in opposition to a host of perceived problems in the broader food system. In this case, the incompatibility of the logics undergirding participants' critiques stifled their ability to positively identify what type of alternative the homemade food at the swap should provide, all but ensuring that few economic matches or social connections developed. Drawing on multivalent opposition from the larger cultural environment can lead to circuit failure by stifling the ability of participants to identify a desired alternative, particularly without money to equilibrate.

This case may be instructive for other sharing economy initiatives, as well as attempts to create novel economic arrangements that deviate from dominant, conventional market practices. Open access, the absence of a cash requirement, and a simple fixed ratio were expected to yield an inclusive trading regime with empowered participants. Instead, it led to uncertain expectations, and even stifled potential connections among a homogeneous group of members. The lesson is that social innovation in the economic arena requires explicit attention to establishing consistent alternatives and widely agreed upon standards of valuation and exchange.

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