

# *New spaces of food justice*

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## New spaces of food justice

‘Food is fundamental to life’ (Sbicca 2012, 456) and this shared need establishes food as a site of potential for connective and convivial practices and relations. Yet, when we realise that more than one billion people are undernourished worldwide (Food Ethics Council 2010), despite the fact that the world produces enough food to feed billions more than the current global population of seven billion (Holt-Gimenez et al. 2012), the social, political, economic and environmental challenges posed by contemporary food systems start to become apparent. Given current global production levels – whether we agree with the social and environmental implications of these or not – it is clear that malnutrition rates worldwide are not simply an indicator of agricultural praxis but demonstrate the continued, broader social and structural issues of access, equity and justice. Recognising that many feel increasingly disenfranchised from formal political representation, marginalised by a hegemonic neoliberal capitalism or disconnected from ‘healthy’ social or environmental relations, food offers an opportunity to re-engage individuals and society with critical questions and practices of justice because, as Allen (2008, 159) notes, ‘no other public issue is as accessible to people in their daily lives as that of food justice. Everyone – regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, or social class – eats. We are all involved and we are all implicated’. The multiplicity of ways in which we can engage with food – including growing, buying, eating, cooking, writing, processing, marketing, selling and watching – enacts its radical potential as a set of dynamic socio-material relations (Alkon 2013; Alkon et al. 2013) that can both conform to and subvert existing practices and understandings, enabling food to ‘speak’ to many different people in a range of different contexts. Although this multiplicity has its dangers (Heynen, Kurtz, and Trauger 2012), it also means that food matters and matters in complex and diverse ways: ‘It rallies people and it often induces unexpected changes in society’ (Van der Ploeg 2013, 999).

In this special issue on New Spaces of Food Justice, we focus on exploring and expanding the discourses and practices of food justice. Although social justice has been a constant, if subsidiary, trend in the food movement from at least the 1960s (Heynen 2009), alternative food movements (AFMs) have historically moved away from this towards more consumer- and lifestyle-focused visions of alternative food systems (Cadieux and Slocum 2015). However, these often niche and ‘precious’ markets (cf. Guthman 2003) have been subject to growing critiques of their class and race-based elitism (Allen 2008; Alkon and Norgaard 2009; Agyeman and McEntree 2014; Alkon and Guthman 2017) leading to the relatively recent construct of ‘food justice’, which has emerged out of a background of diverse social justice concerns to demand attention to the socio-economic, environmental and cultural inequities within agri-food systems and society more broadly (Guthman 2012; Sbicca 2012). The aim then is to confront the causes, processes and outcomes of these inequalities (Agyeman and McEntree 2014) through cultivating ‘access to sufficient, affordable, healthy, culturally appropriate food, and – very importantly – respect and self-determination’ (Bradley and Galt 2014, 173). However, achieving this positive vision is a challenge because the diversity of

social justice concerns and challenges faced in agri-food systems have established multiple meanings for 'food justice', which arguably makes it difficult to motivate a concerted course of action (Sbicca 2012). Indeed the lack of clarity as to what constitutes food justice, for Cadieux and Slocum (2015), works to mask complex and wider socio-ecological dynamics of inequality and thus makes efforts to improve food systems increasingly tenuous and fleeting. We agree that a more explicit understanding of what makes certain movements designated as evoking 'food justice' is essential; indeed we argue that what the current global conditions of socio-economic inequality demand is a much clearer and more critical understanding of food justice as a contested and complex practice. It is not enough to merely talk about food justice, but rather it needs to be explicitly enacted through everyday and ongoing action that is increasingly international and outside of U.S.-based contexts.

Questions around the ethics and politics of food are not new and even before the most recent global price spikes in agricultural commodities in 2007/2008 the volatility of markets, combined with global environmental change, had established food security as an enduring worldwide concern (Goodman, Dupuis, and Goodman 2012). Food security focuses on access to food (FAO 2008), which has fostered a more conservative and narrow drive to increasing agricultural production in order to meet increasing demand (UN 2009). This privileging of industrial agriculture has been met by opposition from food sovereignty proponents who argue that this is further cementing the increasing marginalisation of small-scale producers within export-oriented market systems. Furthermore, this attempt to secure national scale food and energy security for land and business owners is at the expense of the food, and indeed socio-economic, security of those who live on the land (Jarosz 2014) and acts to reproduce the social inequalities that food security nominally seeks to address (Cadieux and Slocum 2015). A more varied food sovereignty discourse therefore offers a critique of the productivist, technocratic, neoliberal models preferred by food security advocates, and instead argues that 'all people have a right and responsibility to participate in deciding how food is produced and distributed. Governments must respect, protect and fulfil the right to food as the right to adequate, available, accessible, culturally acceptable and nutritious food' (People's Food Sovereignty Forum 2009). The oppositional relationship and interaction between food sovereignty and food security is longstanding (Jarosz 2014) but how does the more recent concept of food justice connect into this debate? Cadieux and Slocum (2015) position food sovereignty as more concerned with production, access and control while food justice has tended to concentrate on inequalities of food consumption and access to healthy and affordable foods. In addition, for Jarosz (2014), a food justice framework emphasises racial and class divisions and, by doing so, focuses more on local level and micro-scale responses to food security and sovereignty challenges, at the expense of national and global scale perspectives and drives for change. However, for us, food justice points to the historical inequalities and marginalities across the whole of the food chain, thus dictating a more holistic approach or framing that explores food inequalities across food networks much more broadly (cf. Sbicca 2012). Thus, in this special issue, through its editorial, papers and commentaries, we argue and demonstrate that while food justice rightfully brings questions of inequalities and injustices to the fore, this does not – and should not – act to limit its geographical scope and, indeed should work to expand it across food networks and into local environments and places.

Food justice, in this account, emerges as a contested and multiple concept, which, for some, constitutes nothing more than an empty signifier (Heynen, Kurtz, and Trauger 2012). So why then do we and the authors here consider it important? While acknowledging its potential limitations, the breadth of issues covered by food justice is a strength in its ability to engage and bring into dialogue a wide range of interests, making visible the persistent inequalities that have been hidden by the changing discourses and motivations of alternative food systems. Indeed, the explicit demand for justice arguably highlights the need for socio-structural changes and encourages consideration of what action can be taken by moving discussions around power beyond rural spaces and food production –

the common terrain of food sovereignty debates (Edelman et al. 2014) – to encourage a more holistic network approach to combating injustice within agri-food systems across the spaces of production, processing, distribution, retailing and consumption. In short, for us, food justice has its conceptual and practical issues but these are outweighed by its capability to focus attention on the often invisible relations and practices of inequality and inequity, and to demand action to transform agri-food systems at multiple scales and locations.

To date, academic scholarship on food justice has not necessarily reflected this conceptualisation, having had a somewhat narrow empirical focus with the overwhelming majority of food justice research centred on the inequalities in food access and consumption (see, e.g. Sbicca 2012; Alkon et al. 2013; Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2013) as well as questions of the body (see, e.g. Guthman 2012). This leaves a number of gaps which, as we recognise the interconnected nature of food systems, demands an acknowledgement of how injustices are experienced by the other actors in food commodity networks such as farmers, farmworkers, pickers, packers and processors. ‘Exploitation occurs throughout the agrifood system’ (Allen 2008, 157) and so, if we are investigating the processes and outcomes of food injustice, this more expansive view of food systems is critical. Like other emerging work (see Alkon and Guthman 2017; Moragues-Faus 2017; Barnhill and Doggett 2018; Glennie and Alkon 2018; Sbicca 2018), we wish to build on this more expansive vision of food justice and its ability to consider injustices in (alternative) food systems more broadly. Similarly, and hitherto, there has also been a strong empirical focus on the U.S. experience but, given that food justice is about engaging with real experiences and lives as lived and practised and so challenging dominant, homogenising narratives (Dixon 2014), how these inequities are experienced in different contexts is also important. The U.S.-centric nature of existing research means that racialised inequalities are increasingly, and crucially, well documented (see, e.g. Alkon and Norgaard 2009; Allen 2010; Curran and Gonzalez 2011; Alkon et al. 2013; Agyeman and McEntree 2014; Bradley and Galt 2014) but less attention has been paid to other marginal groups in different national and global socio-economic contexts. The contributors to this special issue help to advance conceptualisations of, and engagements with, socio-economic justice through contemporary foodscapes by building on this foundational body of literatures to expand its geographical, conceptual and empirical reach.

While this collection reflects a novel breadth of empirical and conceptual work, the dialogue the papers, interventions and commentaries establish moves current debates forwards through developing an engaged and contextually grounded understanding of what food justice is and how it is being practised. Through their extensive geographical scope across Europe, Asia and Latin America, they highlight the differences but also commonalities in how food (in)justice is experienced across the world, which creates space for discussions around new and continuing kinds of authority from small-scale producers to the State. The focus on producers – whether as creators of home-grown, homemade or commercial commodities and local spaces - builds on an emerging, more holistic engagement with issues of justice throughout agri-food systems, which is further opened out through considerations of age and class. A key argument that runs throughout this special issue is the positioning of food justice as a physical and conceptual space of learning, experience and empowerment, in which food can be an effective tool to illuminate and promote greater social equity. Such empirical examples are used to ground additional critiques that challenge hegemonic understandings of the discourses of ‘alternative’, ‘local’ and ‘industrial’ in alternative food systems, highlighting food justice’s capacity to provoke radical and critical debate. Therefore, as a collection these contributions open up new conceptually and contextually nuanced engagements with food justice, extending the opportunity it offers for thinking and practising socio-economic and political change into new empirical and conceptual spaces. As stated above, food offers an accessible entry point into a whole host of historical and contemporary issues; while this special issue is focused on opening up discussions around socio-economic justice through the everyday lens of food politics and

ethics, this connects into critical, broader debates around neoliberal capitalism, the role of the State and socio-political mobilisation given that ‘food is more than just another commodity and people are more than just consumers’ (Levkoe 2006, 90).

### The papers in the issue: research on new spaces of food justice

From Hong Kong to El Salvador, England and Bulgaria; from transformative to quiet, cultural and rights-based conceptualisations of food (in)justice, each of the papers in this special issue contributes to expanding the existing geographical, empirical and conceptual engagements with food justice. What is common across these contributions is the idea of food (in)justice as power-laden practices that cut across multiple scales to include or exclude, and the importance of skills in governing this engagement. Megan Blake (2017) provides an excellent entry into a different cultural and geographical space of food justice through her reflection on the impact of colonialism and neoliberalism on Hong Kong’s food systems. While, like scholars focusing on the U.S. context, Blake analyses processes of racialisation, this investigation of a dynamic retail and public health landscape is set in a complex post-colonial context. Working through shifting urban governance regimes, her work draws out the colonial and post-colonial trajectories of ‘white’ and ‘Chinese’ food in Hong Kong and their intersecting and changing impacts on food availability, communities and cultures. Since Hong Kong’s return to China in 1997, a state of food injustice has developed that has shifted from race to class-based social divisions, which also highlights the role of the state in shaping the cultural political economy of Hong Kong’s foodscapes.

Although Ohmae declared in 1995 that the nation-state is obsolete, it is clear that it persists as a key actor organising socio-economic and political structures, practices and experiences. This recognition of an ongoing role for state agency continues from Blake’s work into Maria Yotova’s (2017) paper in which the state continues to play a role in sanctioning and regulating homemade food provisioning in Bulgaria. Through an empirical focus on yoghurt, she considers food relations and practices, which elsewhere are deemed ‘alternative’, through the inflection of a post-socialist context. Yotova (2017) emphasises the moral economy that structures these homemade provisioning practices, and highlights a diverse economy that ranges from neoliberal market forces to sharing and gifting. Justice for these producer-consumers is grounded in ideas of culture, health, heritage and identity with homemade yoghurt offering a quiet opportunity to contest and rework different forms and experiences of social and geopolitical marginalisation, including the urban/rural divide and age, rather than explicitly engaging with politico-environmental ideologies and social activism. The practices around this concept of ‘quiet sustainability’ are further problematised by Moya Kneafsey et al. (2017) who demonstrate that this can also emerge in what are often considered to be more traditional AFMs. Through their evaluation of community food growing in England, they highlight the often-latent potential that exists through participants’ unintentional alignments with alternative and food justice ideals. Practices, skills and knowledge are central to the individual and community capacity-building that emerge through such projects, which, although not always perceived by participants as ‘political’, can offer ‘quiet’ steps towards social transformation. While a food justice framing through a rights-based and bottom-up approach, grounded in the British context of food poverty and austerity, is used in the analysis, the empirics highlight the different frames that structure the community gardeners’ engagements, with ideals of health and taste proving critical. As Kneafsey et al. (2017) argue we must not conflate food justice and ‘alternative food’ with the former proving potentially problematic in the U.K. context of depoliticised food issues.

Naomi Millner (2017) argues that we need to keep food justice political, bringing it into dialogue with food sovereignty through her analysis of the growing permaculture movement in El Salvador. She frames food justice in this production space as confrontational, about active agency, knowledge and expertise, valorising the ‘experiential’ authority of campesinos and challenging power relations as to whose knowledge counts, who chooses and who evaluates farming practices. For Millner (2017, 779)

'food is its context', and her analysis of food justice in the post-colonial and, critically, postconflict space of El Salvador raises questions as to how the concept can account for histories of institutional violence and appropriation. Ultimately food is relational and is always interconnected with its broader environment, which demands that an expansive, responsive and dialogical food justice also accounts for the nonhuman. The final commentary by Agatha Herman, Mike Goodman, and Colin Sage (2018) presents a critically reflective piece that draws on a workshop held at the 'Food Justice: knowing food/securing the future' conference (July 2014, Reading, U.K.), which works to draw together some of the themes, issues and challenges raised in the preceding papers. The authors set out six key questions for the food justice movement, which acts to reflect on past and current practices and fuel future research in this expanded arena.

The special issue concludes with four commentaries from Alison Alkon, Ana Moragues Faus, Joshua Sbicca and Rachel Slocum. While each draw on their different research interests and backgrounds, some common themes emerge out of their critical interventions. The relationality of food justice practices and experiences is emphasised, with Moragues Faus reflecting that they 'are constructed in specific contexts but linked to multiple scales and geographies', while Sbicca argues for 'both and' in accounting for different contexts but maintaining the universal struggle for food justice. All the commentators agree on the need to focus on the larger contexts in which food justice is set and the fact that it can never be understood in isolation from the structures of capitalism, colonialism and racism, and the contemporary, power-laden politics of climate change, migration, labour and land. However, while the intersectionality of justice concerns emerges across the commentaries, both Alkon and Sbicca argue for the continuing need to focus on institutional racism and expand the geographical analyses of racial formation processes, although Alkon acknowledges the need for more emphasis on gender in food justice debates. The conceptual plasticity of food justice is also subject to discussion with engaging reflections on the how, where, for whom and when cutting across these interventions. For Moragues Faus, this culminates in a questioning of food justices' transformative capacity and a call to keep food justice participative and political. While Slocum agrees with the latter, she questions the utility of categorising practices and scholarships under a 'nebulous' food justice. In contrast, Sbicca calls for a deepening of the roots of food justice, while Alkon reflects on the opportunity this definitional discussion presents for engaging with the evolution and trajectory of the food justice movement. The differences and similarities in the different commentators' arguments highlights the continuing dynamism within the food justice field, and the need for further research engaging with these theoretical and practical issues. All commentaries reflect on the role of academics in these debates around food, highlighting a need for reflexive practice in overcoming the divide between food justice scholarship and activism and contributing towards transformative and emancipatory food systems.

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