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Food justice: a conceptual framework and a category of action Perspectives from the Latin American context

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Theoretical advances from Latin America: accessibility and right to food to figure out food inequalities

Food justice is not the traditional framework to analyse food issues in Latin America. Academic works, as well as public authorities and civil society reports, rather use the notions of food insecurity and food sovereignty or sustainable development. Thus, one may wonder whether food justice is just another paradigm coming after another, or whether it brings a real change in the way to figure out food inequalities. However, the Latin American approach actually highlights two different ways to consider food justice: accessibility and right to food.

Accessibility is a first classical way to figure food justice as a good access to safe and quality food. This is traditionally analysed through the consumers' point of view, but the Latin American context brings complexity in the understanding of food accessibility. Indeed land issues are pivotal in the debate over food security. It leads to consider access to resources to produce food as a part of food accessibility as well. This approach highlights as well the processes of connection and disconnection between consumers and producers, between rural and urban areas. As an example, studying the marketing of agricultural products is particularly relevant to analyse those connections and disconnections in the food system. The analysis points out how alternative food networks (AFN) are able to create new markets controlled by the producers themselves, or food initiatives built by consumers. This specific theme of AFN also reflects the circulation of alternative models of supply chains such as farmer markets, producers' stores, baskets, cooperatives, etc., between parts of the continent, all of which share the revival of power and value by farmers as well as the empowerment of consumers. According to this approach of justice, accessibility deals with space or territories. The latter is often seen only as a context to think about food issues. But space plays a major role in creating food inequities, as pointed out with concepts of "food desert", even "food apartheid" (Washington, 2018). Food apartheid is a notion created in the North American context to highlight areas where a lack of access to fresh and safe food combines with a high rate of poverty, ethnicity and health issues. But this notion is very negative and stigmatizing, that's why one might prefer to use the notion of "healthy food priority areas" to underline the potentiality of acting on space to solve the problem.

The second approach analyses food justice in terms of right, according to the work of M.I Young (1990). Such an approach brings the food issue into the context of democracies, underlying the food responsibility of the State, as the right to food is now written in the constitution of several Latin American countries. Moreover, food is a part of citizenship and a way to exercise our citizenship. At an individual scale, the "right to" approach of food justice faces several challenges of Latin America, such as the right to land and land access, the right to have access to food, the right to the city (through initiatives of urban agriculture for example), labour rights in agriculture, in agro-food systems, in distribution sector. Latin American specific issues addressed in terms of "right to" highlight the food justice concept by putting food sovereignty at the heart of the conceptual framework.

Contributions from the dialogue between food and agriculture: studying relations of power in the rural and productive parts of the agrifood systems and facing climate change

Studies in the field of food justice as well as the food justice movement often focus on the issue of food access from the consumer side (Hochedez et Le Gall, 2016). They tend to forget that food comes from the field, and that it is connected to the land. However, there is a lack in investigating on injustices in agrifood systems and employment, and on the structural inequities shaped by agricultural capitalism (Tsing, 2009). Some topics might be analysed in a food justice framework in order to reveal at least relations of domination inside the agricultural systems. This applies especially to labour migrations in agriculture and the reproduction of a modern system of slavery, or to the very limited human rights for the migrant workers on the field.

While focusing on the use of land resources to produce food, there is also a lack of analysis considering the role of production methods in reducing food inequities and in impacting climate change and biodiversity loss: does agroecology bring more food justice, or only more sustainability? Does increasing food justice mean protecting biodiversity? What are the consequences of climatic disasters on crop losses? How climate change can impact rural communities? In Latin America, we must underline the role of indigenous peasant seeds, that lead to figure the place for local knowledges in agrifood systems, thus in food sovereignty. Finally, the dialogue between food and agriculture addresses the question of the "empowerment" dimension in the food justice, and highlights the relations of domination between rural farming communities and the agro-food industries within agrifood systems.

A difficult but necessary dialogue between North and South America on food justice and sovereignty: feeding the debate on racial and migration inequities in the agrifood systems

Focusing on America makes sense while talking about food justice, because America played a key role in the emergence of this concept, "with the defense of food sovereignty emerging from the south and demands for food justice coming from the United States" (call for papers of the Jysala Congress, 2019). To "put forward a collective reflection from the specificities of the social, political, economic, environmental organizations that characterize the continent from north to south" appears as a major challenge. However, crossing the two parts of the continent yet requires a theoretical and practical effort. It allows to raise two main points.

Firstly, the racialization of the food issue seems to be a cross-cutting approach between the two parts of the continent. Indeed, food sovereignty is closely intertwined with the issue of minorities and indigenous people. In most metropolitan areas of the United States, food accessibility is highly racialized, what of the use the notion of "food apartheid" (Washington, 2018) to qualify food desert situation that affects black neighbourhood underlines. In Latin America, the ethnic dimension of food justice mostly relies in the fact that food sovereignty has also to deal with the issue of rights of indigenous people.

Then, circulations and migrations between the two parts of the continent inside the food chain reflect relations that can reveal several forms of exploitation in the frame of the agricultural capitalism (Tsing, 2009). Those circulations are the result of wage inequities, inequities in living conditions between countries. It is as well the result of global mechanisms of devaluation of agricultural employment, and of the global food system organization.

Approaching the territorial and social relativity of the food justice notion

Food justice is a relative notion according to two scales: territorial contexts, and social groups.

On a territorial scale, the regional socio-political context of changes in the American countries plays a major role in the changes of food justice situations. Recent socio-economical and political upheavals have major consequences on food security: malnutrition and hunger dramatically increase, to reach in some place an alarming situation. One other consequence of this situation lies in the withdrawal of the State and public policies, that leads to shift from a tradition of strong public intervention, to a neoliberal logic, combined to a commercial opening.

On an individual scale, the relativity of food justice situation is also a matter of norms. Indeed food justice is usually defined as a situation where everyone has access to safe and quality food. Whereas the answer of what good food or bad food should vary according to social groups, areas or bodies, the division between good food and bad food is institutionally constructed by nutritional policies and medical field. Those policies sum up bodies in expression of pathology or diseased parts: this socially constructed division between bad food and good food appears as an “institutional and academic colonialism”. To the contrary, food justice situation should also consider the complexity of a multiplicity of food systems that relies in each body.

Food justice in action: what is the « right » scale, who is the « best » expert to implement food justice?

Despite the vitality of the concept of food justice in the North American literature, much remains to be clarified about "what it means to do food justice" (Cadieux and Slocum, 2015). This question shares a preoccupation with the food justice movement about what would provide the best combination of theory and action to increase the potentiality of initiatives that pretend to achieve food justice. What would be norms for food justice practices? How to implement a dialogue between several areas (science, art, civil society, activism...) and scales of action to achieve it? Who are the key players of food justice?

Two advances are particularly relevant in recent researches. First, the American context opens the debate on the “right” scale of action to solve food injustice situations: should public policies be renationalize or delocalized? The diversity of stakeholders puts into the debate the role of the public sector, whereas new forms of social organisations based on social relations are growing to develop food initiatives. The origins of the food justice movement also foster the dialogue between academic and politic communities. Who is legitimate to do food justice or to talk about food justice? Are academic people more legitimate than others to talk about it? Who are the best food justice “experts”? Then the food justice theoretical framework advances the researchers’ capacity to provide a holistic analysis of the food system inequities. But researchers do also play a role in the civil society and some present themselves as “activists” in and from the food justice movement. As researchers, they introduce the principle of justice into their way to do research, by creating actions and mechanisms to achieve food justice situations. Recent works dealing with the impossibility to ignore the individual social, racial, gender, political characteristics to explain the position of the researchers question their alleged duty of neutrality or objectivity. In this regard, the dialogue between research and the arts seems to be an efficient way to make visible inequities in food systems, as well as to shape new actions to fight them.

Finally, those questions invite to explore the scope of food justice through 'praxis', i.e. a mixing of theory and action in the fight to change the world (Slocum and Saldanha, 2016).

Exploring new dimensions of food justice in the Americas

Many dimensions of food justice remain unexplored. Thinking about “agrifood justice” (Hochedez and Le Gall, 2016) in the 2010s, when the concept of food justice merged, is probably not the same than to figure future food justice. Four new issues raised and ask to be fostered by further researches.

The first one is violence which is illustrated by sexual abuses on the field, by conflicts between producers and politics, or by social food movements. Beyond the diversity of vulnerabilities, violence in the American context can be figured as the reproduction of colonialism in the food system, which shapes a new kind of modern slavery. Structural and systemic violence is thus a kind of oppression that the framework of food justice can criticize. The second one deals with gender inequalities while considering food injustices. Men and women are not equal in the access and management of resources, for example in forestry. Women bodies are more vulnerable to obesity in some countries, such as Mexico, or to sexual abuses on the field. As reminds us the slogan of Via Campesina: “food sovereignty is about ending violence against women” (2012).

The third merging topic highlights the role of social networks, from several aspects. On the one hand, social networks are useful to develop some food justice initiatives such as short and alternative food supply chains. It both creates virtual markets and makes them visible. On the other hand, the use of social networks can create food injustices as well, if we consider apps to order and deliver food. The “uberisation” of the food system introduces new relations of power and domination. In this context, social networks are also a tool to create new social spaces for marginalised, invisible or vulnerable social groups, as well as for their mobilization. As an example, the chat used by women delivering for Uber Eats allows them to report abuses or security problems on the itinerary. Social networks can thus be a pathway to reach empowerment of vulnerable social groups.

The fifth and last issue considers the power of knowledge as a way to improve food injustice situations, by several ways. Knowledge transfer about food and quality food is relevant to foster sustainable food systems, including for example traditional agroecological knowledge in rural communities. Education programs might also help to achieve food sovereignty and food justice. In this area, further researches or food justice initiatives should focus on the role of children and youth as the future of food justice. It means that education will play a major role in the changes that will occur. This is the most important and relevant pathway to reach food justice.

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