

Chapter 2

Introduction to Food Justice in a Global Context

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Abstract This introduction argues that food justice concerns are always global in nature no matter how local they also are. William Shanbacher uses the lens of food sovereignty to understand how food justice can connect local causes into a global transnational movement while incorporating underemphasized issues like poverty, gender, and race.

Keywords Food justice · Food sovereignty · Globalization · Transnational movements · Refugees

2.1 Food Justice and Food Sovereignty

Right now, there is enough food in the world to make sure that every single person on the planet gets the food they need to lead a healthy life. As a global community, we are food blessed. Hunger is not an environmental reality. It is a societal choice. Social and political issues—poverty, gender inequality, and racism, to name a few—create barriers to food access and security. Around the world, food activists campaign for the human right to food and against large corporations threatening local food production and distribution systems. We work toward an understanding of hunger and nutrition that includes attention to health, culture, and sustainability, not merely basic calorie counts. We consider the impact of our eating on our neighbors, human and non-human alike. And we seek to understand how our local food issues intersect with wider global systems of access, power, and control.

Food justice is an ideal that invites us to think about health, culture, and sustainability, the tensions between global and local actions, and the impact of our food practices. Food justice theory and practice ask that we think as widely as possible,

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asking the questions that arise for activists like Maya Terro in the preceding vignette. When we reflect on the basic requirements of food justice, and speak about poverty, hunger and food justice, we must recognize the basic reality that if we feed each other, then we can dialogue with each other, and we can ask these important questions about food justice. Our food system is a failure. In fact, it has exacerbated all of the problems we face today. For instance, in the US food waste is estimated at between 30 and 40% of the food supply (USDA, n.d.). Globally, we waste our money on wars and politics, not food. This is not pontificating, this is a reality that we can fix, a reality that is at the core of food justice.

When we speak of food justice we need to think about it categorically differently. Perhaps we should think about it in terms of food sovereignty. Food sovereignty was defined in one of its original iterations:

Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations. (Declaration of Nyéléni 2007)

In the United States we also see the vision of food sovereignty taking hold. As the US Food Sovereignty Alliance states

We support movement away from the dominant, corporate-controlled food system, which is shaped by systems of power and oppression. Our solutions must dismantle systemic food injustice rooted in race, class, and gender oppression. We respect people and other forms of life over profits. We honor everyone's work in the food system, including unpaid, underpaid, and devalued labor. We work to honor our human commonalities and restore traditional ways of growing, preparing, sharing, and eating food as a community (US Food Policy Alliance 2016).

In these two visions of food sovereignty we see connections being made between the US and global understandings of the term. As the introductory vignette of this section of the volume points out, there are many dimensions that need to be discussed. Perhaps we will move forward with these chapters and think of these questions. My research is in a sense an advocacy for food sovereignty, but it also opens up questions to multiple perspectives. As an ongoing movement, even my perspectives change. In these two definitions, one international, one specific to food sovereignty in the United States, we see that the term food sovereignty itself is a contested and dynamic term. As Annette Desmarais notes, food sovereignty is “an ‘idea,’ ‘concept,’ and ‘framework’...a ‘mobilizing tactic,’ a ‘political project,’ a ‘campaign,’ and a ‘movement’ (Desmarais 2014).

Food justice as defined through the lens of food sovereignty takes on a new tone. When seen as food sovereignty, food justice is a dynamic term that cannot be completely encapsulated by words and it cannot be a rigid term as “justice” historically has been understood. In my research with food sovereignty, and in my conversations with advocates, activists, and scholars, it is clear that we may not all agree on what justice requires. *But that might be the point, and the challenge.* Food sovereignty has become a concept and a movement that has transcended many

disciplines and perspectives. Yet, as those who have worked with food sovereignty know, this is part of the challenge. We debate, we discuss, and we disagree. Within the movement, there are often conflicting interests, from peasant farmers to small-scale farmers to larger-scale farmers, who sympathize with the perspectives and arguments of food sovereignty.

For now, I think the most pressing issues include: How can race be more incorporated into the conversation? How can gender issues be included? How does the economic system fit into all of this? These are challenging questions to answer, but need to be included, and many of the chapters in this volume offer new and important potential answers. The perspectives in these chapters bring to bear experiences from the United States and abroad that must be a part of the conversation. Although the US has a vibrant and growing food sovereignty movement, food sovereignty is a global concept and movement, which brings it more in-line with traditional philosophical and legal notions of the concept of justice. Food sovereignty urges us to think on a global level even through our local food and agricultural decisions and policies.

Too frequently, food justice efforts become isolated. It is easy to become so discouraged by the injustice of large corporations and global power structures that we disengage. But the work we do as food justice activists is both inherently local and inextricably global. Food justice work is *always* within a global context, whether we explicitly acknowledge it or not. The refugee crisis, climate change, and hunger are major problems for FoodBlessed, for Lebanon, and for the world. Global forces make our work both harder and more important. But they can also provide solutions and tools for action, as we learn from each other, join in solidarity, and share resources. Together, we can tackle local issues of food injustice for the global advancement of universal justice. This volume hopes to contribute to this conversation. The chapters provide expertise in a diverse milieu of subjects and provide us with more resources for our continued effort.

David Leichter's chapter, "Remembering Food, Doing Justice: From Edible Memory to the Culinary Imaginary," introduces the ways in which memory and the participation of eating others' foods can function as an act of "mnemonic resistance" to (neoliberal) capitalist forms of domination and oppression. The act of eating others' foods can be an act of solidarity in which the "consumer" experiences, albeit indirectly, the history and identity of the Other. One of the inherent characteristics of capitalist modes of production and consumption is its tendency to make us forget our pasts. Food becomes simply a commodity necessary for day-to-day life; it loses its history and its cultural value.

Leichter attends to the ways that eating others' foods we might gain a deeper recognition of how food has shaped our own identity, but also ways in which our consumption patterns shape and re-shape the identity of others. Herein lies the risk of participating in the consumption of others' foods. We want to join in solidarity with others by sharing in their cultural and culinary past, i.e. become part of that past, but also avoid (or at the very least recognize ways we might be) appropriating or "colonizing" that past. We can share in this past, but we must not dominate it.

While recognizing the omnipresent risk of appropriating others' identities in the process of sharing food and food histories, Leichter's essay compels us to join in solidarity by learning about others' pasts, their cultures, their traditions, customs, experiences and histories. This form of knowledge formation is quite different from a capitalist form of knowledge in which knowledge formation inherently involves a form of forgetting our past.

Justine Williams' chapter, "Building Community Capacity for Food and Agricultural Justice: Lessons from the Cuban Permaculture Movement," provides an entry into the world of permaculture via a case study of the Fundación Antonio Núñez Jiménez de la Naturaleza y el Hombre (FANJ) in Cuba. Using food sovereignty and food justice as organizing principles, Williams argues that FANJ, and permaculture in general, is an example of a positive alternative agricultural movement that can bring people together and "bring new 'worlds' into material existence." Through emphasis on community autonomy and control over agriculture, organizations like FANJ work toward bringing about a healthier and more sustainable global food system. Focusing on cooperation, energy efficiency, resource management, and respect for natural ecological cycles, among other things, permaculture builds upon many of the existing practices of food sovereignty, but also, as one activist puts it, provides a "life philosophy."

Williams couples the concepts of "community capacity" and "skillful disclosure" as alternative frames through which to build more substantive food sovereignty and food justice movements. She responds to criticisms by food sovereignty organizations that domestic policies may at least occasionally serve to limit food sovereignty/justice goals. She does this by coupling the concept of "community capacity" (a community's commitment, resources, and skills to address local problems and opportunities) with the concept of "skillful disclosure" (new spaces, or "new worlds" created when people gather together to discuss policies and practices that can build stronger communities). Williams argues that with community capacities and skillful disclosures, local organizations have the potential to find ways to address any state-level limiting factors on pursuing food sovereignty and food justice.

Marisela Chavez's chapter, "It's Not Just About Us: Food as a Mechanism for Environmental and Social Justice in Mato Grosso, Brazil" provides a fascinating ethnographic analysis of an organization (The Landless Workers Movement, or MST) that has embraced food sovereignty as a natural extension of, and a means to, achieving full food justice. Chavez's work in Mato Grosso nicely illustrates the potential of food sovereignty's focus on food producers and food production as central to the attainment of social justice. Concrete steps are taken that actually produce food along more sustainable, and more economically sound in the long-term, agroecological lines. This food concretely improves the food sovereignty in the area, and also provides a praxis for activists in MST to engage in outreach (while selling their wares), advance political development through conversation with their fellow farmers, and pass these values and knowledge to future generations more successfully.

Chavez says something quite important when she says that different people she worked with and interviewed had different emphases and concepts of exactly what food sovereignty stood for—primarily for environmentally sound and sustainable food production, or primarily as a vehicle to social justice, or primarily as a way to support food producers’ individual autonomy. As Chavez rightly points out, these are real differences but for all of them: “It’s about justice—for people and the environment. They believe that looking at agriculture through a different lens helps connect people to the understanding that it’s not just about people respecting the environment, but also about people having a different relationship with each other.” This is the promise of food justice in general and food sovereignty in particular—to bring together people working in different places on different particular injustices primarily to build solidarity networks of aiding one another.

Seven Mattes’ chapter, “Save the Whale? Ecological Memory and the Human-Whale Bond in Japan’s Small Coastal Villages,” presents an example of the larger issue of the ways in which culture, traditions, history, and geography shape our responses to questions of food justice. On the one hand, environmentalists have appropriated the whale as a sort of “poster-species” symbolizing the devastation of nature and animal life. The whale’s beauty, grandeur and peaceful demeanor make it an ideal animal to evoke emotions and provoke protest against its hunting. On the other hand, nations such as Japan have highlighted that the global anti-whaling movement is based less on scientific evidence and concern about the future of the whale and more on the “ideological”/emotional sensibilities of anti-whaling campaigns.

Mattes argues that many “western” perspectives fail to recognize the cultural, religious, and historical value of the whale and whale-hunting for these Japanese fishing communities. The success of environmental anti-whaling campaigns comes at a cost to local communities that depend on the whale for sustenance and regard it as a symbol of their culture. In extremis, the success of anti-whaling campaigns could result in the loss of culture(s) tied to the whale. Mattes’ chapter raises important questions pertaining to possible conflicts of interest among food justice/sovereignty organizations who take seriously less obvious but still very real harms, such as harms to oceanic ecosystems, harms to non-human animals, and harms to communities and cultures as a whole.

As one reads through these chapters, one cannot help but notice many themes that resonate with the suggestion that we look at food justice in a global context *as* food sovereignty—the idea that food sovereignty activists make justice demands which must be addressed by the wider society, and also that if food justice is to be achieved, food sovereignty must be at the center of any discussion of what a just food system must look like or how to get there. This volume, and these chapters in particular, will provide an important context for this debate around the role of food sovereignty, as well as new tools for working out an answer to that debate.

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