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From food security to the enactment of change: introduction to the symposium

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Abbreviations
AFNs Alternative food networks
FS Food security

Introduction

Over the past five decades, the concept of food security (FS) has taken on various meanings (Smith et al. 1992; Maxwell 1996; Carolan 2013b). Although food is clearly the common denominator, it is the emphasis on security that is less consistent, swaying from yields to calories, from states to households, and from metrics to perceptions (Maxwell 1996). The changing emphases consequently lead to food security being enacted for different objectives and justifications. For one thing, food insecurity within the increasing global populations has become the main driver of producing food at an amazingly rapid rate (Godfray et al. 2010). Yet, food security is also one of the reasons for

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the flourishing of local and alternative food networks (AFNs) in many parts of the world—encompassing wider concepts such as food sovereignty and food justice (Jaroz 2014). This prompts the question: if food security is understood and valued through a variety of meanings (Mooney and Hunt 2009), how should we then re-frame actions emerging from food security within changing contexts?

Inspired by a lively discussion in a working group session at the annual meeting of the Australasian Agrifood Network in 2013, this symposium offers various ways to contextualize food security to different urban and rural contexts. The symposium stems from a realisation that food security, despite being the subject of extensive literature, still lacks a satisfactory theoretical explanation to account for the large divergence of actions observed to date.

Indeed, the current literature represents food security as a state/condition, in which a society is linked to food at a particular time and space (Godfray et al. 2010; Naylor and Dean 2012; Carolan 2013b). However, the definition also embodies multiple aspects of, and actions sprouting from, political, economic, social and ecological realms. If food security is to be seen as the desirable outcome against food-related uncertainty that is pervading our current times, then disagreement on how to get there implies a re-definition of the actors and relationships involved. Consequently, there is a need to shift emphasis from understanding 'how food security is to be measured' towards 'how food security is to be performed' in a given context. This symposium analyses limitations and strengths of local and AFNs in its contribution to the discourse on food security, opening a constructive dialogue between different theoretical approaches and grounded-empirical research on a wider understanding of food security, where the link with 'local food' and 'alternative food networks' is considered as central.
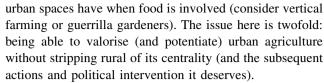
Contributions to this theme include geographical, sociological and social–psychological world views, in an interdisciplinary effort to investigate ways of achieving and performing food security in different geographic locales.

The theme food security has been developed largely in the literature, with studies focusing on the many aspects and performative actions around the local and alternative food discourse, but there have been fewer attempts to specifically link actions emerging from such a construct to ways of performing food security. The starting point in single debates on food security was sustainability (Lawrence et al. 2010), whereas for others was the 2007-08 food crisis (Maye and Kirwan 2013). In this symposium the starting point is a generalized unease with the status quo and the awareness that purported solutions to the issue of food security have to move consistently from a largely understood imperative to have only a systematic approach. If frequent crises are related to too many causes, then 'many' solutions seem to be the answer mired at different levels (civic, market, institutional, social). While quite simplistic at first glance, the answer nonetheless implies a multiplicity of actions, first of all the ability to think theoretical approaches devoted more to openness. If food security is understood as mere food availability then it is no surprise that cases such as food banks are seen as a solution in urban environments, with the guilty omission of the meanings and implications that food brings about. After all, it seems that the most important thing is having food, no matter what and how. It is appalling to see how all the positive features we attach to food (e.g. identity, relationships, care, tradition, conviviality, sharing) that are heavily exploited in the market place to attach value and therefore claim a greater reward (usually understood as higher economic returns), go completely unnoticed, or even hidden, when it comes to food security; as if food itself is a luxury and the relationships involved (social, economic, ecologic) are as well.

The same reasoning goes for alternative and local: to underplay the reach of alternatives and relegate it in the corner of limited action (that is, alternatives lack power, they will never become the new mainstream) serves no other function than to reduce our chances to effectively tackle food insecurity. Local and AFN have overlapped for a long time in the literature; local, though, does not perform well as the unequivocal reference for 'alternative' and vice versa.

The analytical triangulation of local, AFNs and food security has to face the role of two central categories of thinking in agrifood studies: rural and urban. Urban and rural seem to lose their differences and peculiarities when associated with local and AFNs, with the risk of marginalizing rural in food provisioning or, on the contrary, to limit the inventiveness that individuals living in urban spaces have when food is involved (consider vertical farming or guerrilla gardeners). The issue here is twofold: being able to valorise (and potentiate) urban agriculture without stripping rural of its centrality (and the subsequent actions and political intervention it deserves).

While it can be said that urban agriculture might never be able to provide for the needs of the urban environment (not to mention that of the rural environment), it cannot nonetheless be denied that urban agriculture (and, by extension, also urban food) is: firstly, one of the many steps involved in relieving pressure on the availability of food at a local level. Urban agriculture and food reach those who are food insecure and completely cut off from food other than industrial, processed, *relationship-less* food. Secondly, their value has to be thought of in terms of the dichotomous relationship between rural and urban and in the articulation of the symbolic interaction between the two; in other words, its importance may be to help remind us the value of rural and the need to protect it—in the same way Cronon's remark on how a tree in the city reminds us about the magic of wilderness and the necessity to think wilderness and our relationship with nature in relation with our state of contemporary urban*ised* human beings (Cronon 1996, p. 24). Food security therefore becomes the material, necessary consequence of a paradigm that accommodates both urban and rural dwellers in their different but interrelated needs.

Cross-cutting themes in this symposium

Maye and Kirwan (2013) talked about a fractured food security consensus that has permeated recent debates. This can still be held true as we look at food security as a public issue discussed outside of academia, but it is also for this symposium. The papers have resulted in nuanced positions, stemming from different disciplines, practices and different geographical locations. But, at the same time, there are many convergences upon which authors think through the issue of food security. The following are common themes embraced in the papers, emerging form a cross-reading of the key-points featured in the articles.

Food security, food sovereignty and food justice

While food sovereignty and food justice movements have been historically different, it is no surprise (and no news) that food security is associated with them. Food sovereignty has been central to debates on food security (see Jaroz 2014 for a brilliant discussion on the relationship between the two). When food is conceived of as a relationship-less entity, food sovereignty helps re-imagine our perceptions of food in such a way that it then serves two

functions. Firstly, as a paradigm, the concept of food sovereignty not only re-constitutes the web of relations that sustain food, but metaphorically indicates which strings to pull in order to ring the alarm bell that signals danger; in this case, we mean precisely the danger to forget those relationships. Secondly, as a performed activity, food sovereignty enlivens debates and enacts change at the grassroots level, igniting change in a bottom–up motion. Food security and food sovereignty sometimes overlap and relate to food justice, proposing a right-based approach to entitle people to a more just food provision, echoing the recent direction undertaken by the UN and related jurisprudence (Elver 2014). It has to be noted, though, that there is strong resistance by global market forces to a right-based approach to food security. While food justice has become a shared concept for the public audience, it is yet to be seen how the call for rights will be implemented in a society where institutional change has been the ongoing (political) turmoil of the last two decades, as highlighted in the next theme.

Neoliberalism, economic production and the role of institutions

Neoliberalism is one of the threads, sometimes subtle or explicit, of the six papers. Critiques have been addressed largely on the effects of implementing neoliberal politics; pivoted on a productionist logic (Rosin 2013), neoliberalism is acknowledged as the real constraint for actors. In a neoliberal frame, institutions are deprived of much of the political power that would act as a medium between economic actors and citizens. If food is a right, it needs to be accorded a specific status that involves specific agrarian politics; such a status cannot be enforced by any other (impartial) third party, since access to food has to be granted on the basis of more than economic power (or without violating other human rights such as dignity). To manage uncertainty (and in our case the uncertainty of food) has historically been the role of institutions, but this role has shifted to the market (Davies 2014) with great consequences (and many contradictions). Who (or what) will prevent a food desert to flourish (oxymoron intended) if producing more doesn't even equal a larger number of individuals consuming more, since access is constrained by too many factors dependent (directly or indirectly) on that same productionist logic that dispense of politics? How do we tackle food insecurity effectively if institutional actors espoused the aforementioned logic? Who and what will prevent illegal activities, crime (as a mind-set before being actualised) and the consequential disruption of communities to spread if the main political paradigm is giving up to its institutional role?

Community and relationality

We steal the word 'relationality' from Carolan's paper (this volume). Community seems to be one of the answers to questions posed in the previous section and is one of the other major threads emerging from the papers. Communities (and the same goes for 'local') are referred to in the papers without prejudice for the size, both small and medium-size; geographically, as a group of people related because of proximity; socially, as a group of people sharing the same culture and social environment; as value-driven as a group of people bound by same values or same attitudes towards food-related matters. While it is true that people have found many ways to gain access to food, especially when organized socially, as a collective or as a community, the burden placed on communities themselves cannot be underestimated. Politics has served the role of third party support for citizens facing markets, with institutions placed between politics itself and citizens; what kinds of restructuring do communities undergo in a given neoliberal society? What spaces are left open for people to engage in community actions towards food security if they lack the means to participate in community life? Do communities have all the means to grant food security? How does a community respond to the issue of food security in urban areas and in rural areas? And finally, how is change enacted at a community level—change in terms of access to food, power relations, and sustainability, that demand of change represented by the very real existence of AFNs and the issue of food security? Relationalities seem to be central here: it is through a deeper understanding of how they work that we can imagine and enact change. If communities coalesce as alternative food networks when confronted with corporations, we might ask what other spaces are left aside to make those same communities stronger—and also what happens to those who do not belong to communities, whether it be because of indigence, because of personal preferences or because they do not fit neatly into any categorisation?

Enacting change (and empowerment)

While different issues are exposed and the outcomes of particular actions, politics or approaches are subjected to critique, the positive feeling that emerges from the papers cannot go unnoticed. The papers present different readings about food security, ranging from a more structuralist approach to a post-structuralist one; this reflects a turn in the focus of agri-food scholarship over the last decade and an opening to a scholarship of 'possibilities' (Carolan 2013a). We cannot underestimate the role that AFNs have played in steering the attention of the public audience on matters of sustainability and in placing great emphasis not

only on (agri-)food but on change itself. What was really just a very specific group's concern slightly more than 10 years ago has now become a political issue. To re-embed food in its social context implies a necessity to 're-claim' it through an active engagement performed in everyday life. Change comes from a different understanding of relationalities and posits the need of different ontological readings; empowerment of individuals and groups targets a redefinition of relationalities and results in half of the papers as the subterranean means to enact change.

More theoretical work is needed on how change is enacted and we welcome as many contributions as possible. We consider this symposium as an invitation to different perspectives and we hope it will be part of broad discussions on agri-food themes and how to favour and support positive change.

Understanding and performing food security

In the literature, food security has been analysed and dissected to help disentangle the issue many times; while we applaud such enormous work, we want to focus also on the performance side of food security and the different responses presented. We do believe we need to devote our attention to praxis and performances and assess the different contexts.

The symposium is opened in a disruptive way by Carolan, who provokes us in order to think about relationalities in the context of food security. How change is enacted, from the micro-spaces up to the macro-level is the particular focus of this paper. Carolan has familiarised us with co-experimentation (2013) and the path to make the unthinkable, thinkable and the undoable routine; here he drives us into the realm of relationalities departing from hydroponics and the legalisation of marijuana in Colorado. Carolan talks about assemblages, focusing on the phenomena that cause a change in the way we perceive and understand our reality. His paper is admittedly controversial in a symposium dedicated to food security, in his attempt to investigate the precursors of change from the very quotidian-ity, of what is already existing from what seems to be normal to think about: his invitation to de-centre our knowledge about food security speaks at the very ontological understanding we have of it.

Following on assemblage and on the elaboration of different theoretical understanding, we move to the antipodes and we land in New Zealand where the case-study of Dunedin is presented in the paper by Dwiartama and Piatti to invite the reader to a different reading of the local food system. The paper opens with a clear articulation of food security and noting how there's not just one approach to

that, implicating the plurality of solutions that might be employed. The need to capture complexity is evidenced in the case-study exposed. The attempt to create a local food network in Dunedin was the departure point in order to think about our conceptualization of relationships; it is emblematic how drawing a chart about the different actors that makes the reality of a city or a community forced the authors to reconceptualise relationships, roles and discourses on AFNs and food security at the same time. Food security emerges therefore as the re-articulation of these relationalities and actors.

The next three papers keep the focus on urban populations but assumes different stands although they all present a critique of the underlying neoliberal setting in which the issues are nested; while the third and the fourth paper focuses on AFNs—their positive role posits the role of urban food movements and AFNs as a response to food insecurity, the fifth paper questions the role of AFNs for food security and whether a focus on urban is the right approach and argue for a biased favouritism that benefits urban spaces and population.

Clendenning, Dressler and Richards propose two case-studies from the US where urban food movements are seen as enablers of food security amidst growing poverty; placing these movements in the context of a corporate regime (McMichael 2009), urban- and alternative- food networks challenge the idea of Big Food through the means of food sovereignty and food justice. These two, while being different, engage in a metaphorical battle that is premised on the ability to think of a different food system, reclaiming not only food, but also spaces, both physical and mental.

The fourth paper bravely combines agri-food with social psychology. It ideally extends the discussion from the previous paper in terms of social justice and community empowerment. Through the discussion of illegal activities in Southern Italy, Milani Marin and Russo question the relationship between food security and local and 'legal' food. In such a context and in the midst of a geo-political change that re-designs the role of institutions in administering legality, food security is suggested to be contributed through a re-localisation of legal food.

Dixon and Richards move away from an urban-focused approach and introduce the Urban Bias theory in the context of AFNs and food security. The authors propose an analysis of Australia's food security and deconstruct the basis upon which it is built through a detailed analysis of national related issues, ranging from colonial history to nutrition and health, which favour urban population. Dixon and Richards contest the practical contribution to food security that AFNs have in the Australian context (but not their role in contributing to a mature food citizenship) and argue for a re-spatialisation of institutional dynamics that

would engender a cultural shift necessary to widen the perspectives.

The last paper closes the symposium with a positive legacy. Wald and Hill reprise the duality of food security-sovereignty and reassert the role of AFNs and local food. Through a discussion of the geographical concept of 'scale', the authors move from a mere emphasis on food security towards food sovereignty and advocate the incorporation of the concept of food utopia. Such a concept is an open invitation to go beyond a mere critique of the deficiencies and limitations of agri-food systems in an attempt to create a framework where a plurality of issues and actors are represented and sustainability achieved.

A final reflection emerging from the six papers is then provided by Campbell. Campbell's commentary reviews the emerging themes from the papers and propose a reflection on the state-of-the-art of scholarly research in the agri-food field. Campbell looks at the collection in this symposium and comments on the change our field has undergone, from a very politically economy-centred research to a more nuanced assemblage of positions and research interests. Among these positions, Campbell suggests, there is also a vested political interest that reveals a common necessity of new trajectories to make sense, and face the risks and threats, of this historical period.

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