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Editorial: Critical praxis and the social imaginary for sustainable food systems

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Editorial on the Research Topic

Critical praxis and the social imaginary for sustainable food systems

The premise of this Research Topic is that the challenges confronting contemporary food systems necessitate a fundamental reimagining of how individuals and broader social collectives understand their roles—both personal and professional—within them. The dominant neoliberal and technical-rational perspectives that have long governed a globalized approach to food systems are deeply intertwined with other systemic inequities, entrenched privileges, and extractive practices including settler colonialism, white supremacy, ableism, patriarchy, and heteronormativity. Together these forces shape how knowledge is produced and how action occurs within our food systems. These forces and frameworks have created the systemic concerns that characterize our current food system, and those structures and processes have demonstrated marked resistance to change. Our call for this volume emphasized that a shift away from the way of knowing that legitimates and underpins this situation is imperative.

Freire (1972) concept of critical praxis offers an illuminating frame for navigating the epistemological and ontological assumptions and thinking that shape the current food system. His conceptual framework offers analysts a way to reconsider and reframe practices dynamically; that is, in a fashion in which they are not only enacted, but also continuously theorized, evaluated, and reimagined as they evolve. The iterative character of that process highlights the importance of understanding the active operation of power via individual and collective agency. More importantly, it moves scholars beyond efforts to capture “what is happening” and toward identifying generative ways that interested stakeholders may participate actively in the creation of more just and sustainable food systems.

In our view, this Research Topic resulted in a fruitful set of responses to this overarching challenge. As a group, these articles critically engage with various relevant onto-epistemic questions and frameworks. These include, among others, agroecology, regenerative agriculture, Black agrarianism, radical pragmatism, decolonizing strategies, and urban ecology. Collectively, these analyses question the dominant thinking in which today's food systems are entrenched and highlight perspectives that can help to disrupt their dominant meta-narrative that is today driven foremost by efficiency and technology claims, and to explore policy interventions, justice-centered strategies, community-engaged collaborative efforts, and the deep reflexivity that can reveal alternate ways of thinking to those now prevailing. The analyses collected here call on food system scholars,

practitioners, and policymakers to work actively toward realizing a future in which such structures and processes are ecologically and socially sustainable and equitable for all.

Beyond these core concerns, these analyses are characterized by at least four major cross cutting themes concerning the steps that may be necessary to secure significant change in the West's regnant food system narrative. These illustrate the remarkable social, political, economic and cultural complexity implicit in attaining meaningful change in this domain. Perhaps first among these themes is the need to recognize the wide range of actors with stakes in food systems. These include growers, who may be subsistence farmers or operators of gigantic farms and ranches alike, those who transport and provide storage of their products for wholesale markets, those who prepare and offer those foodstuffs and meats for retail sale, political decision-makers, and the broader population served, which may be located locally or in distant global locales. More, wholesale and retail product, storage and transportation markets may be local, regional, national or international in scale. Notably too, nations are variably equipped to provide the physical and social infrastructures necessary to permit growers awareness and latitude to contemplate change from their existing knowledge. Indeed, each of these elements should be considered as reflecting a point on a spectrum with actors arrayed on a continuum of scale and capacities of various sorts. Perhaps the most elemental competence necessary for systemic change is actor (read individual and collective) awareness of currently shared beliefs and sufficient information and common determination to imagine and realize current food system processes differently. This Research Topic of articles suggests that can be a difficult challenge to meet, especially for subsistence farmers.

Second, the fact that today's neoliberal food system narrative is intertwined with a variety of perspectives that work to enervate shared social belief in human equality based on capitalism as well as racialized, patriarchal, religious or ethnic claims of superiority is often a profound impediment to changing the story underpinning its current dominance. This is so because truly democratic change in food systems that will result in improved prospects for social justice for all demands that all within them be treated with dignity and respect and be compensated justly for their work. Such cannot occur when colonialist, ethnic, racial, or religious hierarchies continue to operate amidst economic exploitation of any actor in the system based on relative capacities or perceived inferior social or political standing.

Third, the ongoing cruelty of systemic injustice rooted in racialized or gender social hierarchies in diverse national contexts suggests that food system change is unlikely to result from logistical/supply chain or alternate planning/planting/irrigation or harvesting improvements alone. That is, one might successfully equip a subsistence farmer, for example, with a knowledge of different crops or of ways to plant and grow them as well as with ways to store and transport them to new markets, but much of that information dissemination might not matter if social and structural ostracism continues de facto to usurp the realization of those possibilities in practice. This fact in turn suggests that long-term systemic changes in food systems to ensure they treat all within them equitably and do not continue to despoil the earth's environment, will not occur simply with technical changes. Instead,

as Freire understood, and these articles demonstrate afresh, they will need to be constructed on a foundation foremost of shared social belief in human dignity and equality. Ensuring widespread acceptance of those values will require changes in broadly held hierarchical social norms or in long standing social cruelty targeted to specific groups in the West and in many other nations. While the character of these varies across countries, their results are everywhere the same for affected food system actors—diminished rights and life possibilities.

Finally, these observations suggest that scholars should continue aggressively to explore not only how to build the technical capacities and rights awareness of those working within food systems now structurally disadvantaged within them, but also to devise democratic processes to encourage the populations now oppressing them to adopt alternate ways of knowing that celebrate their common humanity with those they had previously victimized. While the technical project of sustainable farming at scale for a growing global population in forms different from those now polluting and exhausting waterways and soils worldwide is daunting, the human project of equipping those affected by these, positively or negatively, with the capacities to meet those challenges by creating new and more equitable food systems is still more difficult. This Research Topic demonstrates that this project is doubtless a major intellectual undertaking, but one well-worth undertaking.

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