



The idea of food as commons or commodity in academia. A systematic review of English scholarly texts



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ABSTRACT

Food systems primary goal should be to nourish human beings. And yet, the current industrial food system, with its profit-maximising ethos, is not achieving that goal despite producing food in excess. On the contrary, this system is the main driver of malnutrition on the planet, as well as environmental degradation. Nonetheless, food systems also play a double role as Nature's steward. Deciding which role we want food systems to play will very much depend on the idea we have about food. What is food for humans? The dominant narrative of the industrial food system undeniably considers food as a tradeable commodity whose value is mostly determined by its price. This narrative was crafted and disseminated initially by academics, who largely favoured one option (commodification of food) over the others (food as commons or public good). In this research, the author aims to understand how academia has explored the value-based considerations of food as commodity and private good (hegemonic narratives) compared to considerations of food as commons and public good (alternative narratives). A systematic literature review of academic papers since 1900 has been carried out with Google Scholar™, using different searching terms related to “food + commons”, “food + commodity”, “food + public good” and “food + private good”. Following the PRISMA methodology to clean the sample, a content analysis has been carried out with the 70 references including “food + commons” and “food + public good”. Results clearly show that both topics are very marginal subjects in the academic milieu (only 179 results before cleaning) but with a sharp increase in the eight years that followed the 2008 food crisis. On the contrary, “food + commodity” presents almost 50,000 references since 1900 (before cleaning), with a remarkable increase since the 1980s, coincidental with the dominance of neoliberal doctrines. The phenomenological approach to food (epitomised in the “food as” searching term) largely prevails over the ontological approach to food (“food is”) except when food is identified as a “private good”. This result points to the ontological absolute “food is a private good” developed by the economic scholars as a dominant narrative that locked other valuations of food by legal, political or historical scholars or non-scientific epistemologies. In a world where the industrial food system has clearly proven its unfitnes to feed us adequately in a sustainable way, the need for academia to explore other food valuations seems more urgent than ever. Scholars need to approach other narratives of food (as commons or public good) that go beyond the hegemonic and permitted ideas, unlocking unexplored food policy options to guarantee universal access to food for all humans, regardless their purchasing power, without mortgaging the viability of our planet.

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, human activity in the terrestrial biosphere is the single greatest factor modifying the structure of landscapes across the globe (Ellis and Ramankutty, 2008). The human societies living on Earth are already in a new geological era, known as the Anthropocene (Crutzen and Stoemer, 2000; Waters et al., 2016) characterised by one single driver, the human species, being a

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major player affecting Earth's natural variability. Actually, we are mortgaging the livelihood of future generations to maximise economic and development gains in the present (Whitmee et al., 2015) with patterns of overconsumption of natural resources that are unsustainable and far beyond planetary capabilities (Steffen et al., 2015). That may ultimately cause the collapse of our civilisation and our very existence as a species (Barnosky et al., 2012; Horton et al., 2014). And within the wide array of human actions, food production, including agriculture, fishing and food produced for non-human consumption, is the biggest transformer of Earth, contributing significantly to degradation of natural habitats, arable land and losses of wild biodiversity (Scherr and McNeely, 2012; Rockström et al., 2017). Nonetheless, food systems also play a double role as Nature's steward (Brandon et al., 2005; Harvey et al., 2008; Whitmee et al., 2015; Wittman et al., 2016), especially when they are managed under agro-ecological principles (Bengtsson et al., 2005). Deciding which role we want food systems to play will very much depend on the idea we have about food. What is food for humans? How do we regard, value and approach an essential resource for our survival and societal development?

I examine in this paper the role of the academic scholars in developing, promoting, undervaluing or even avoiding specific value-based narratives associated to food since 1900, namely the consideration of food as a commodity (and the associated consideration as a private good); or, alternatively, as a commons (and public good as associated term). Narratives are considered as social constructs intertwined with values, ideological stances, priorities and aspirational beliefs, and they shape the transition pathways (Fairbairn, 2012; Geels et al., 2015) and the referencing framings that condition the policies of the possible and discard non-accepted political beliefs treating them as "naïve", "utopian", "undoable" or "delusional" (Goffman, 1974; Wright, 2010). The value-based consideration of food is therefore regarded as a key element to understand the narratives that sustain different transition pathways in the global food system. In that sense, academia is a major contributor to constructing, polishing and disseminating the dominant narratives that are then shaping public policies, corporate ethos and moral economies (Allen, 2008).

Nevertheless, academia's contribution to define narratives of transition is also conditioned by the context where it takes place, the historical developments and hegemonic positions of powerful actors (Steinberg, 1998), and thus the framing process is dialectical and evolving (Benford and Snow, 2000). Concepts are framed in accordance with the shifting political and discursive situation but they also have a role in shaping the dominant discourse (Ferree and Merrill, 2000). Applying this rationale to our research, academia is not isolated from the dominant narratives that pervade the circles of the ruling and financial elite (Wallerstein, 2016), and therefore its role in shaping a dominant understanding of food as a commodity (hegemonic narrative) or a commons (fringe narrative) is influential to the ruling agents as well as influenced by the ruling agents.

The article is structured as follows: in the first section, recognizing the multiple meanings food is bestowed with, the opposing normative views of food as commodity and commons are explained in detail, including (a) the historical interpretation of the enclosure and commodification of food, a process exacerbated in the last decades of last century; and (b) the renaissance of the valuation of food as a commons by contemporary civic food initiatives (reinventing food meanings) and customary food systems (resisting the transformation of traditional food meanings). The second section presents the methodology that will be used to undertake the systematic analysis of the valuations of food in scholar literature in English since 1900. The main goal here is to understand how the academics have addressed both concepts, with a detailed content analysis of those exploring the fringe narrative (food as a commons

or public good). The third section includes the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the research terms associated to the normative valuations in Google Scholar™. The numerical analysis breaks down the four clusters of searching terms related to food as a commodity, private good, commons and public good. The qualitative analysis deepens the interpretation and contextual meaning of food as a commons and public good in the academic literature, with 70 references analysed. The thousands of academic references to food as a commodity renders the in-depth analysis unattainable at this point, although it merits to be done in the future to shed light on the commodification process of food. Finally, the fourth section deals with the conclusions that highlight the widening gap in scholarly knowledge between the normative view of food as a commodity and that of the commons. Academia has been shaped by the dominant narratives of privatisation, enclosures and commodification but it has also shaped and enriched the dominant narratives, especially the economic epistemology of private goods, privileging the commodification of food over its commonification.

2. What is food: a commodity or a commons?

Food is a resource with multiple meanings and different valuations for societies and individuals. As an essential resource for our survival (De Schutter and Pistor, 2015), the desire for food is the most powerful driver of human agency (Malthus, 1798/1872; Grodzins-Gold, 2015). Food can be rightly considered a societal compounder (Ellul, 1990, p53), a network of meanings and relationships (Szymanski, 2014), a subject to gain and exert power (Summer, 2011) and a means to contest the established power balance (McMichael, 2000). Or all of them together. Moreover, food is nature, culture and religious beliefs. Food shapes morals and norms, triggers enjoyment and social life, substantiate art and culture (gastronomy), affects traditions and identity, relates to animal ethics and determines and is shaped by power and control. Therefore, this multiple and relevant meanings cannot be reduced to the one of tradeable good. The value of food cannot be fully expressed by its price in the market, as the Spanish poet Antonio Machado once nicely said: "only the fools confuse value and price".¹ The six dimensions of food posited by Vivero-Pol (2017a), namely food as an essential life enabler, a natural resource, a human right, a cultural determinant, a tradeable good and a public good, cannot be reduced to the mono-dimensional valuation of food as a commodity. Actually, many scholars engaged with alternative food movements – be that food sovereignty, right to food, transition towns, agroecology, de-growth or alter-globalisation – agree that food should not be considered as a commodity (Castree, 2003; Rosset, 2006; Zerbe, 2009) although just a few dare to value it as a commons (Dalla Costa, 2007; Akram-Lodhi, 2013; Roberts, 2013; Rundgren, 2016). Likewise, none of the well-known critics of the absolute commodification of nature ever questioned the nature of food as a commodity, least to say proposing its reconsideration as a commons (Marx, 1867; Polanyi, 1944; Appadurai, 1986; Ostrom, 1990; Radin, 2001).

Following Ileana Szymanski's analysis (Szymanski, 2015, 2016), food has a multiplicity of meanings some of which oppose one another, a description that perfectly mirrors the different dimensions of food, being some of them contradictory like being a human right and a commodity at the same time. This author, applying the critical feminist approach to objectivity, science and knowledge to food (cf. Longino, 2001), states that food is nothing but a social construction (humans decide what is food and what is not eatable by moral or religious reasons) and the epistemological

¹ "Solo los necios confunden valor y precio" in the original.

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