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**Food for Justice**

Power, Politics  
and Food Inequalities  
in a Bioeconomy

2021

# Food for Justice: Power, Politics and Food Inequalities in a Bioeconomy

Preliminary Research Program

Renata Motta

The **Food for Justice Working Paper Series** serves to disseminate the first results of ongoing research projects in the field of power, politics and food inequalities in a bioeconomy in order to encourage the exchange of ideas and academic debate.

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## Abstract

The Junior Research Group Food for Justice examines normative questions of inequalities, justice, and democracy that arise in disputes surrounding the question “how are we going to feed the world?”. Increasingly, citizens perceive the global food system as part of the historical causes of the ecological crisis and persisting hunger in the world. Although the reasons for these causal links have long been known (the use of food for profit, the gap between production and consumption, conflicts over land and water, exploitative labour relations, the energy matrix and waste generation, among others), research on food security and the bioeconomy tend to rely on the same solutions i.e searching for technological fixes toward a profit-oriented model that exploits living matter. What is needed in order to complexify the debate and contribute to socio-environmental transformation is more knowledge about which food system citizens desire, which alternative knowledges and technologies already successfully handle such claims for justice within food politics, and how to redirect public policies towards a democratic, ecological and just food system. Combining theoretical perspectives on global entangled inequalities with social movement research, Food for Justice looks at challenges and solutions both in Europe (focusing on Germany) and in Latin America (focusing on Brazil). The research consists, on one hand, of case studies of social mobilization targeting injustices in the food system and, on the other, case studies of alternative food initiatives, knowledges and technologies, such as agroecology and alternative food networks. Food for Justice aims at providing a theoretical and conceptual framework – grounded on empirical research – to analyse social and political projects that address inequalities based on class, gender, race, ethnicity, rurality, citizenship, and categorical divisions between humans and more-than-humans, thus building democratic, ecological and just food politics.



**KEY-WORDS:** Food, social change, transformation research, social sciences, environment, inequalities, bioeconomy, food systems, food movements, intersectionality, gender, decoloniality, knowledge, technology.

## Short biography

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## List of Figures

Figure 1 Food for Justice research program	04
Figure 2 Food movements	07
Figure 3 Multidimensional inequalities.	23
Figure 4 Multi-scalarity and spatialities.	24
Figure 5 Intersectional inequalities	24
Figure 6 Dynamics of transformation	24
Figure 7 Research questions and case studies	28
Figure 8 Research questions and methods	30



# Content

<b>1   Social change towards ecological, just and democratic food politics</b>	<b>01</b>
1.1. Transformation research and the environment in critical social sciences	04
1.2. Open debates: food movements and change	07
<b>2   Decolonial and feminist epistemologies of food and ecology</b>	<b>10</b>
2.1. Decolonial epistemologies and critical studies of science and technology	10
2.2. Gender theoretical lenses and feminist epistemologies	13
<b>3   Global entangled food inequalities</b>	<b>17</b>
3.1. Structural forces	17
3.2. A multi-scalar and relational spatial perspective	19
3.3. Intersectionality	21
3.4. Dynamics of transformation	22
3.5. Food Inequalities: a conceptual framework	23
<b>4   Preliminary research program and methods</b>	<b>25</b>
4.1. Methods	29
<b>5   Expected contributions and outcomes</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>33</b>

# 1 | Social change towards democratic, ecological and just food politics<sup>1</sup>

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Bioeconomy emerged as a policy solution to the ecological crisis, based on the idea of transforming the basis of the economy, in terms of resources, from one that relies on fossil fuels to one relying on bio-mass [BMBF 2020].<sup>2</sup> Food production and energy generation came to be the focus of much policy debate, in crisis scenarios often dominated by Malthusian narratives of a growing world population with finite planetary boundaries. The omnipresent question – “**how are we going to feed the world?**” – is the subject of heated debates, with different voices and interests competing to shape food futures. In this dispute, all sides take up the issue of the sustainable use of natural resources. However, the formulation of the problem and the narrative chosen to frame it might foreclose the search for real solutions.

First, the main challenge in feeding the world is related to access to food, since evidence shows that there is enough food to feed the world population, but hunger rates persist and even increase [FAO 2021]. For this reason, it could be defined as a problem of distribution rather than production. Second, agrarian production as destined for food consumption, on the one hand, or for biofuels, on the other, may well constitute competing goals within the dominant paradigms, but they can be complementary in alternative agrarian production systems, often marginalized by public policies. Third, framing the problem in Malthusian terms, as a matter of resource use and population growth, reduces it to technocratic solutions, overshadowing the economic and political stakes surrounding food and environmental issues. Fourth, dominant policy solutions rely on ideas such as agriculture intensification with new technologies, i.e. more of the same, without critically assessing how dominant forms of agrarian production and food trade are amongst the main drivers of climate change [Crippa et al. 2021], not only through land use change, deforestation and oil-based agrarian inputs in production, but also due to the use

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- 1 This Working Paper presents the research program of the Junior Research Group Food for Justice: Power, Politics and Food Inequalities in a Bioeconomy. The original research project that was submitted to the call for applications from the Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung (BMBF, German Ministry of Education and Research) in January 2018 was revised to incorporate suggestions made by the experts who participated at the selection committee in June 2018 as well as the preliminary findings and adaptations made since the beginning of the Research Group, in April 2019. Wherever the first results were published or presented at conferences, they will be quoted accordingly.
  - 2 There are many different bioeconomy definitions. As this research project is funded under the German National Bioeconomy Strategy, it will use the latter's definition: “The Federal Government of Germany defines the bio-economy as the production, exploitation and use of biological resources, processes and systems to provide products, processes and services across all economic sectors within the framework of a future-oriented economy” [BMBF, 2020, 3].



of fossil fuels in global trade [ZSLW 2016]. In addition, there is a considerable amount of food waste along the chain [UNEP 2021]. Finally, the industrialization of food habits and nutritional transition taking place at different paces in different world regions has been accompanied by epidemics of obesity, malnutrition and non-transmissible diseases [Swinburn et al. 2019] that are heavily impacting on public health systems and aggravating sanitary crises as recently been attested to by the Covid-19 pandemic.

In addition to all these rather material and economic considerations related to food production and food distribution, there are cultural and political matters at stake. Food is material and symbolic, and connects body and mind, nature and culture. Eating is a physiological activity that assumes varied expressions in diverse food cultures. Human activities related to food form complex social relations, systems and processes, ranging from food production, distribution, and preparation, to consumption and waste. These are replete with meaning and culture, as well as politics and power. Food issues evoke distributive conflicts as well as struggles for the recognition of cultural differences. Therefore, seeing food through the lens of a productivist approach – on the generation of biomass – misses its entanglement in a series of historically constituted, power-laden and culturally significant social relations.

Therefore, inquiring into how food systems – the processes of transforming and providing food that involves the phases of food production, distribution, preparation, consumption and waste [Goody 1982]<sup>3</sup> – broadly relate to the environmental question is central to discussions about the transformations needed for new modes relating to nature. This goes beyond changing the resource basis from fossil fuels to biomass production and relates to societal transformations away from dominant forms of relating to nature in different stages of food systems, as well as in the politics and policies that shape these processes. Even the idea that nature is a resource is disputed. Policy makers have indeed noticed that such a change concerns not only technology and the economy, it requires a societal transformation, and they have thus started to fund research related to societal aspects, such as values, norms, practices and social conflicts involved in such processes. Funded within the call “Bioeconomy as Societal Change” from the *Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung* [BMBF, German Ministry of Education and Research], the Junior Research Group *Food for Justice: Power, Politics, and Food Inequalities in a Bioeconomy* [from now on, *Food for Justice*], situates itself within transformation research in critical social sciences [Asher and Wainwright 2018; Bauhardt, Çağlar, and Riegraf 2017; Dörre et al. 2019; Lorenz 2016; Neckel et al. 2018; Escobar 2015, 2018]. These situate discussions on environmental crisis and change within social theoretical traditions that raise questions about the roles assigned to states, markets and civil society as agents of social change, taking normative

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3 The concept of a food system used here is a sociological category and relies on Jack Goody’s [1982, 37] formulation, situated within the intersections of anthropology and sociology of food, and should not be confounded with contemporary usages within policy discourse. Taking a stance in the debates between structuralist, culturalist, and developmentalist theories, Goody argues that, in contrast to the more static and functionalist explanations of the first two schools, the latter differentiates itself for its focus on history and change, in processes such as industrialization and urbanization. Furthermore, Goody warns against understandings of culture – and food cultures – as based on endogenous factors and as isolated from encounters. Instead, he highlights the constitutive role of relations between societies, including asymmetrical relations such as colonialism and imperialism, as important dynamics of transformation. Goody’s conceptualization also distinguishes itself from more policy oriented uses of food system, as it is based on a broader theorization of class systems, structures of political authority, and the sexual division of labour, embedding food relations in economic, political and cultural realms.

and political issues concerning inequalities, justice, and democracy into account. Food for Justice draws on the sociology of food and the interdisciplinary field of food studies, given their cumulative conceptual and empirical research on food and social change.

In what follows, I will situate *Food for Justice* within debates in environmental sociology and the interdisciplinary field of transformation research in the tradition of critical social sciences (Section 1.1), highlighting contributions to these research agendas through the topic of food. The topic will be approached through the lenses of social movements engaged in food politics, conceptualized here as food movements, as privileged instances to look at social change from below (1.2). Next, I present epistemological considerations guiding research in *Food for Justice*, namely, decolonial and feminist perspectives on food, ecologies and knowledge generation. This entails an epistemological stance towards decentering the abstract, universal, undefined subjects of social movements and food politics alike (Section 2). In order to assess the relative aspirations of food projects in achieving such all-encompassing transformations, *Food for Justice* relies on the conceptual framework of global entangled inequalities (Jelin, Motta, and Costa 2017; Boatcă 2016) and develops the concept of food inequalities, which are multidimensional, multi-scalar, intersectional and dynamic (Section 3). Conceptual development is a central contribution of the project, by linking debates on transformation to conceptual developments in research on social inequalities, operationalized in the topic of the role of food in socio-ecological transformations. The research questions will be approached empirically within a research design composed of case studies in the Global North (Europe, Germany) and the Global South (Latin America, in particular, Brazil), and relying on a multi-methods approach (Section 4). Finally, *Food for Justice* strives to make both academic and practical contributions (Section 5).



Marcha das Margaridas, Brasilia 2019 © Renata Motta

All in all, *Food for Justice* positions itself within debates on food futures through the generation of scientific evidence and knowledge committed to transformations towards democratic, ecological and just food politics. It deals with normative considerations of inequalities, justice, rights, alternative technologies and knowledges, and democratic possibilities of making food politics otherwise.

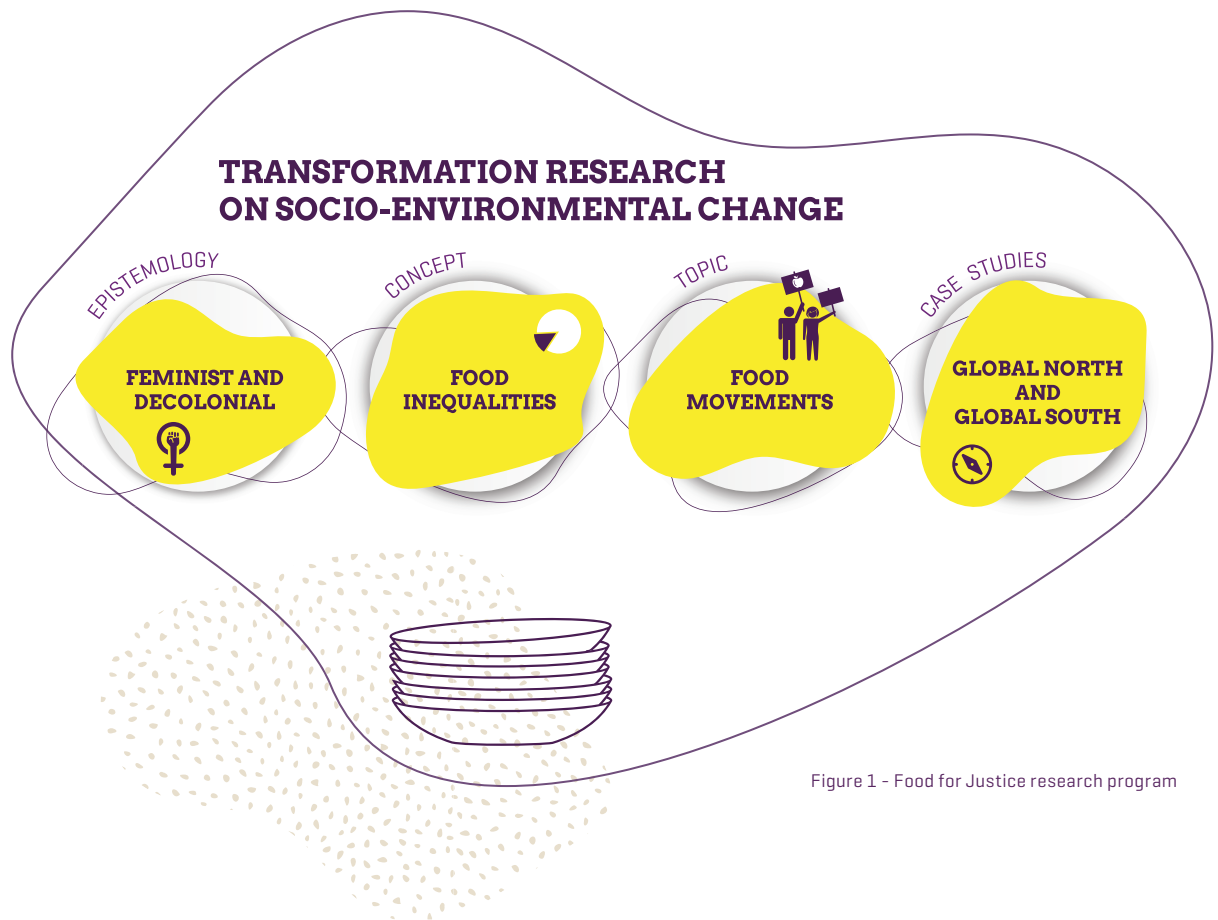


Figure 1 - Food for Justice research program

## 1.1. Transformation research and the environment in critical social sciences

Social change is a classic topic of sociology and refers to processes that are foundational for the constitution of modern societies, such as urbanization, industrialization, secularization. In the 1980s and 1990s, a new wave of changes associated with new transport and communication technologies led to novel conceptualizations of modernity and society, with a particular emphasis on agendas associated with globalization. At the dawn of the 21st century, the Zeitdiagnose of a multiple crisis affecting diverse areas of social life, such as work relations; care policies and the welfare state; financial markets; energy and food production; migration and human rights, have all culminated in a renewed policy and research agenda on change, also known as transformation research. There is a considerable amount of scientific evidence and growing societal consensus on the diagnosis of an ecological crisis. However, there is little agreement on solutions and changes are implemented at an extremely slow pace. Sustainability emerged as a magic word to ad-

dress such a crisis scenario. Starting within environmental debates, sustainability has been extensively qualified as environmental sustainability, social sustainability, economic sustainability, and so on.

Critical sociological research on environmental transformation has called attention to the importance of not taking sustainability claims for granted, but rather analysing the competing visions of future, values, networks of actors and interests, practices and infra-structures at stake when such a concept is mobilized. Adloff and Neckel [2021] classify three ideal types of what they called trajectories of sustainability, understood as a sociological category: modernization, transformation and control. Sustainability as modernization involves imaginaries and projects in which economic growth is a condition for ecological sustainability, and market-led and policy incentives towards technological innovation assume a key role (e.g. green capitalism). Sustainability as transformation, by contrast, identifies the dynamics of the hegemonic economic system as a main obstacle to environmental sustainability, and sheds doubt on the promises of technological solutions alone. It advocates instead for a more radical change, by furnishing new relations to nature, technology, economy and society (e.g. degrowth, post-capitalism, buen vivir). Finally, sustainability as control is a trajectory in which authoritarian and concentrated power structures react to disaster scenarios by devising control measures for vulnerable populations and safety enclaves for the privileged few (e.g. surveillance technologies, practices of segregation).

Another contribution from critical social sciences is to investigate how solutions to the ecological crises might themselves exacerbate social inequalities and generate new types of inequalities. These can be socio-economic inequalities amongst different groups within societies, as identified in the concept of ecological distinction [Neckel et al. 2018], as well as inequalities between societies and world regions, which have been conceptualized in terms such as neo-extractivism [Svampa 2019; Burhchadt and Dietz 2014], externalisation societies [Externalisierungsgesellschaften] [Lessenich 2016], the imperial mode of living [imperiale Lebensweise] [Brand and Wissen 2017].

Drawing on these discussions, dominant policy narratives on bioeconomy can be associated with the trajectory of ecological modernization, as they rely on the very same economic, technological, environmental and social relations that created the socio-ecological crisis in the first place, and have not adequately articulated issues such as distributive conflicts, struggles for recognition, power asymmetries, or inequalities between world regions. Scholars have highlighted how discourses dominating bioeconomy agendas are characterized by an optimistic bet that seeks solutions through technological fixes, such as biotechnology, to adjust modes of production in order to maintain a profit and market-oriented model, exploiting, in this case, living matter. Well-known problems from intensive agriculture, such as soil and water contamination, biodiversity loss, health and environmental impacts of agrochemicals and fertilizers; the reduction of the labour force and exploitation of migrant workers; the competing uses of land for energy and food production; and the knowledge and power asymmetries in key technologie are not addressed [Backhouse et al. 2017; Birch, Levidow, and Papaioannou 2010; Birch and Tyfield 2013; McCormick and Kautto 2013].

In an overview of bioeconomy strategies, Backhouse et al. [2017] conclude that three issues merit further attention. First, the global inequalities that characterise the socio-ecological crises, absent in the mainstream narratives about sustainability and bioeconomy. These rely on neo-Malthusian arguments while neglecting the historical inequalities in natural resource usage, with a minority of the world population in the Global North<sup>4</sup> leaving an enormous ecological footprint while population growth in the Global South is held responsible for the impacts of the former. Second, bioeconomy strategies neglect the importance of alternative types of knowledge and technology such as agroecology, despite evidence showing that it uses less energy, emits less carbon, generates employment and shows a high degree of technical innovation. Finally, limited attention is given to the significant role of public participation in the transition towards a biomass-based economy.

Food for Justice builds on this scholarship on critical sociological research of environmental transformation to investigate food politics. Food politics refers to the relational and political ontology of food, beyond its material and symbolic dimensions. Food is political in the sense that power relations, asymmetries and disputes are embedded in practices of producing, distributing, preparing, consuming, and wasting food. Food politics or the politics of food should not be confused with food policies or any conception of politics as restricted to the institutional realm of the political system; rather, it refers to the everyday political dimensions of food relations and its normative underpinnings, including matters of inequalities, justice and democracy. It is also important not to reduce the politics of food to instrumental, rational and strategic conceptions of social action and politics, and to ideas of decision-making and food choice, but include also non-rationalized, praxeological conceptions, the role of affects and emotions in everyday practices, and decisions from individuals and collective actors. Practices and decisions of what to produce, what to eat, and with whom, are all politically charged issues.

Considering that dominant bioeconomy research and policy agendas understand sustainable food systems as relying on imaginaries of ecological modernization, Food for Justice will conduct research on projects of socio-ecological transformation in food politics. It considers collective actions from mobilized citizens and social movements as agents of social change, whose knowledge and technologies are often marginalized and not recognized as innovation. Social movements might have designed solutions that address issues not only of environmental sustainability, but also incorporate dimensions of inequalities, justice and democracy.

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4 Global North and Global South are used here as categories to refer to geopolitical relations of power and to inequalities related to the global difference between different world regions. It draws on ongoing debates within world-systems theory, postcolonial and decolonial theories, to move away from concepts such as core-periphery, Third-World, and developed vs. developing countries: "North-South terminology, then, like core-periphery, arose from an allegorical application of categories to name patterns of wealth, privilege, and development across broad regions. The term Global South functions as more than a metaphor for underdevelopment. It references an entire history of colonialism, neo-imperialism, and differential economic and social change through which large inequalities in living standards, life expectancy, and access to resources are maintained." [Dados and Connell, 2021: 13]. Global North usually refers to the world regions of Europe and North America, and Global South to the world regions of Latin America, Africa, Asia and Oceania. Such historical global patterns of inequalities between world regions shall not obscure, however, dynamics of inequalities within regions.

## 1.2. Open debates: food movements and change<sup>5</sup>

With varied goals, constituencies and strategies, social movements have been mobilized against injustices related to food and to construct solutions to overcome these. Within the rural poor, peasant movements have denounced class inequalities in access to land, credits, and production policies, while also incorporating agendas such as food cultures and agroecology under the banner of food sovereignty [Holt-Giménez and Altieri 2013; Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2010]. Alliances between agrarian movements, popular feminisms, and feminist movements have explored connections between feminist and food agendas [Aguiar 2016; Conway 2018; Masson, Paulos, and Beaulieu Bastien 2017; Siliprandi 2015]. Food justice movements emerged in the USA against white privilege in alternative food initiatives and denouncing institutional racism in the food system [Alkon and Agyeman 2011; Guthman 2011; Slocum 2007]. Decolonial struggles for territorial rights and self-determination are often led by indigenous movements and black rural communities, threatened by higher levels of food insecurity and lack of autonomy to reproduce culturally appropriated foodways [Santos 2020]. Animal rights and vegan movements draw attention to multispecies food politics of resistance and care [Beilin and Suryanarayanan 2017; García 2019]. Amongst urban feminists, black movements and ecofeminists, veganism emerges as a new practice. [Carmo 2019]. Alternative food movements, initiatives and networks (AFMs, AFIs, AFNs) aim to reconnect producers and consumers in various forms such as farmers' markets, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), Fair Trade, local and community food systems, as well as state institutional markets, including farm-to-school programs, and food banks [Allen 2010; Goodman, Dupuis, and Goodman 2012].

**In short, the diversity of peasant movements, food sovereignty movements, alternative food networks and initiatives, popular feminist rural movements, food justice movements, agroecological movements, and veganism will be brought together under the umbrella term “food movements”.** Needless to say, this denomination does not exhaust their agendas and histories, aiming instead to combine a variety of actors engaged in transforming food systems. Social innovations and mobilizations around food form a privileged instance to observe social change because they are actively engaged in transforming food politics and the food system.

Three open debates regarding the dynamics and directions of change in food systems and food regimes [Friedmann and McMichael 1989]<sup>6</sup> deserves further research: 1) the politics of solidarity and coalition-building across these movements; 2) their alternative character or emancipatory potential, and 3) the commensurability, travel and disconnections between different activist idioms in framing food. First, there is consensus regarding the need to change the global food system in



Figure 2 - Food movements

<sup>5</sup> This section is based on the article Motta [2021].

<sup>6</sup> In addition to the concept of food systems, as defined by Goody [1982] to refer to political, economic and cultural dimensions and changes along different phases between production and waste, the concept of food regimes [Friedmann and McMichael 1989] will also be used as a theoretical reference within food studies here. Food regimes is a concept that emerges within world system theoretical perspectives to also highlight historical, structural and asymmetrical formations in global capitalist dynamics and state-relations between different world regions.

times of multiple crises. However, there are many different concepts for reform or transformation and a number of divides that prevent coalition building. There is disagreement vis-à-vis the leading role of different movements in shaping new dynamics of change. Friedmann (2005) argues that claims from movements for healthy and green consumption have been selectively appropriated in a new, environmental-corporate food regime (Friedmann 2005). In turn, McMichael (2005) insists that peasant movements demanding food sovereignty are more likely to transform and shape the trajectory of an emerging food regime. Another divide regards movements concerned with sustainability and those concerned with social justice (Altieri 2012). Yet another conflict line divides reformist and radical movements (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck 2011). There is a need to develop research on coalition building that overcomes such divides.

Second, there is an open debate in food studies regarding the emancipatory potential of these movements. This applies to issues of green and healthy consumption, in terms of the extent to which it fosters neoliberal subjectivities (Guthmann 2008), which substitute politics and collective action for individual consumption choices, and creates new inequalities such as class-divided diets (Friedmann 2005). Another issue under discussion is whether alternative food networks create new exclusions in forms of class privilege, racial privilege and defensive localisms, and how local food movements incorporate aspects of social justice (Goodmann et al. 2012; Allen 2010). Finally, the ambivalences of emancipatory possibilities are under scrutiny in peasant movements, such as how to reconcile the defense of family farming with the fight against gender inequalities (Agarwal 2014); the importance of not defaulting to the use of technology tout-court, shaping instead the development of technology for emancipatory purposes (Kloppenborg 2014); the need to engage with international and domestic markets, as well as with the state, in order to shape an alternative agrarian development model that responds to global challenges (Edelman et al. 2014).

Third, social movements have challenged dominant understandings of food as a commodity, food security discourses, and any reductionist understanding of food – such as nutritionist quantifications – with new activist idioms and expressions to denote the political ontology of food politics. Faced with the danger of becoming only one more of these dominant narratives, policy discourse on bioeconomy must be opened up to enter into conversation with activist discourses, which at present are completely ignored.<sup>7</sup> Social movements have mobilized concepts such as food autonomy, food sovereignty, food justice, the human right to food, food heritage, food democracy, food citizenship, local food, regional food, good food, *comida de verdade*, and soul food. These movement discourses may well travel across transnational activist networks, but they may equally be very contextual and situated. Just as with sustainability discourses such as degrowth,

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7 Some preliminary analysis of activist discourses and policy discourses on discourses on bioeconomy and agroecology were presented by Meinecke and Küppers (2020)

*buen vivir*, and postdevelopment, varied discourses on the politics of food can offer ways into understanding situated struggles over food, their potential for transformation, the scales in which they might operate, and their ability to travel and adapt across spatial and social borders.

The name of the Junior Research Group *Food for Justice* should not be confused with the activist discourse on food justice, which is more empirically situated within black movements and environmental justice activism in the USA. Rather, food for justice plays with the expression food for thought, which refers to good inputs with which to think social change towards democratic, ecological and just food politics through the empirical lenses of food. Food for Justice is an expression chosen to investigate transformations that take into account social inequalities and normative considerations of justice in a broader sense. Informed by critical social theories of justice [Fraser, Honneth, and Wolf 2003], justice will be conceptualized as involving demands for redistribution, claims for recognition, demands for political participation, as well as struggles to define the scales of making rights claims. The expression food for justice is thus also broader than concepts used within food studies, which often have travelled from activism into theory, such as food democracy and food sovereignty. Justice will be treated empirically by looking at varied discourses mobilized to claim rights and fight injustice in the food system, without a priori defining a preferred activist discourse or social scientific term within food studies.

*Food for Justice* will advance research on these open debates on food movements, bridging between contestation and alternative food initiatives. Considering the first debate, it will look into case studies of broad coalitions of social movements over food. With regard to the second issue, it will inquire how food movements address various dimensions of inequalities and what they leave out, as well as how they relate not only to the environment, but also to technology, the state and markets. Finally, in relation to the third issue, by doing research on both the Global South and the Global North, *Food for Justice* aims at tracing connections and conversations between these varied discourses of justice mobilized for shaping food politics otherwise. This will be informed by decolonial and feminist perspectives, as described below.





## 2 | Decolonial and feminist epistemologies of food and ecology

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A decolonial and feminist perspective brings to the fore relations of exploitation in food politics, aims to visibilize marginalized actors, knowledges, practices, and proposes the constitution of relations based on logics of care and respect in socio-ecological transformation in food politics. Considering the structural orderings of institutional racism and sexism built into the food system, decolonial and feminist perspectives can provide epistemological, theoretical and methodological orientation in the research endeavours of *Food for Justice*.

### 2.1. Decolonial epistemologies and critical studies of science and technology

Scientific knowledge and technology are central components of the episteme of modernity, and are conceptualized as abstract and universal. This means that scientific knowledge is conceptualized as situated neither spatially nor socially, thus enjoying international validity; it can circulate without barriers. This understanding of knowledge, science and technology is central to the paradigm of ecological modernization in its purported strategies to shaping sustainable food systems: agricultural modernization, the new green revolution, agriculture 4.0, and new generation biotechnologies. Networks of actors, institutions, interests, and artifacts ensure the international dissemination of such technologies and policy solutions. However, there are political and economic asymmetries involved in the trans-regional circulation of agrarian technologies developed in the Global North, which controls machinery, pesticides, GM seeds as well as has a monopoly on patents, the industrial production of which is concentrated there. The Global South, by contrast, is a recipient of such technologies or even a laboratory to test them, and a supplier of raw commodities for the global market.

Such a dominant paradigm of knowledge and change is not undisputed. Social movements advocate for different models of socio-environmental change: these have taken two main forms. First, they contest the dominant agrarian technologies, claiming that these actually cause environmental damage and socio-environmental injustice. The literature in science and technology studies traces the



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networks of science and power that are responsible for undone science, that is, the lack of scientific studies on health and environmental harm, and concepts such as counter-expertise and citizen science to show how laypeople, along with allied scientists also build knowledge to support their claims for justice (Arancibia and Motta 2019; Frickel et al., 2010).

A second way of contesting the dominant modern paradigm of knowledge is the fight for recognition of knowledges and technologies that – despite their success in producing healthy and ecological food – are not promoted in public policies, are underfunded, or not even recognized as technologies. Despite their strategic and economic relevance, alternative imaginaries, technologies, and farming practices face to difficulties when it comes to entering into public policy debates. This calls attention to the importance of rendering visible the stories in which the challenges that created a need for bioeconomy were successfully handled. Social studies of science and technology have revealed the embeddedness of knowledge in social relations, shedding light on relationships between knowledge and power. Such scholarship traces the connections between actors and artifacts in networks that establish some forms of accepted knowledge and truth, while excluding other forms of knowledge. In this sense, it is important to inquire which types of knowledge are accepted and recognized in shaping ecological transitions, and which are excluded.

Food production and exchange that take place at the margins of the capitalist market, and its accepted modes of production and knowledge, have been historically neglected. A great deal of work has been accumulated regarding plantation agriculture and the transregional trade of global commodities between colonies and metropolises, such as sugar, banana pepper, and coffee [e.g. Mintz 1986; Soluri 2009]. Little is known, however, about the production and exchange of real food that actually fed people in the colonies, for example, starting with the workers from plantation economies, who were not fed on sugar and coffee alone. Newer historiography on slavehood has started to fill the gap with regard to social organization and economic organization of Black communities in the colonial Americas, and

there are references to what were called slave gardens or *jardin créoles*, that is, spaces of food production in which Black communities produced diverse and nutritional food, contributing to agrobiodiversity in a desert of monocultures, while allowing them rescue their food cultures (Diawara 2009; Haraway 2016). Contemporary examples include ecological agriculture in many of its diverse guises, biodynamic agriculture, permaculture, agroecology, and household gardens. These involve knowledge and technologies that both promote agrobiodiversity, such as seed banks and exchanges, ecoforests, as well as producing food without pesticides in a wasteless, diverse and nutritional, year-long [covering seasonal shortages] manner that conserves soil. These are less dependent on external inputs and generate less waste, by using organic inputs and waste materials such as compost (Altieri and Toledo 2011; De la Bellacasa 2015). In a lineage from the colonial plantation system, in which farming is understood as synonymous to agribusiness, and global trade is portrayed as the solution to food security, there is thus a pressing need to generate knowledge about the invisibilized technologies and knowledges that have fed the majority of the world's population over time and geographies.

This research agenda has been taken up by science and technology studies, as well as feminist and decolonial theories of science (Asher and Ramamurthy 2020; Haraway 1988, Harding 1986). Decolonial theories denounce the coloniality of power and knowledge and consider the role of alternative concepts of socio-ecological transformation, such as pluriverse, *buen vivir*, ecofeminism, degrowth, and post development (Asher and Wainwright 2019, Mies and Shiva 1993, Santos 2018; Kothari et al. 2020). By contrast, decolonial approaches to knowledge see the potential of a *diálogo de saberes*, a dialogue across ways of knowing, in which the epistemologies of the Other to global modernity are also recognized. In defense of their food cultures, various subaltern groups display cosmologies of food as relational and webs of life, against reductionist and individualist conceptions of food (Matta 2021; García 2020). Food, health and ecology are understood in holistic ways, in which food is also medicine, family, and community. Food connects with ancestrality, spirituality, and mother earth; nature is seen as a being that needs to be taken care of.



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Based on a decolonial approach to knowledge, *Food for Justice* distances itself from the assumption that the purported global solutions for the environmental crisis, such as agrarian technologies, characterized as one-size-fits-all solutions, can be diffused in the absence of friction, usually from the North – where these are developed and patented – to the South. Against the danger of bioeconomy strategies that reinforce such a paradigm, a decolonial approach could pluralize bioeconomy. It has the potential to decentre it from universal and all-encompassing conceptions of technology, knowledge, market and economy. A decolonial perspective can illuminate other values, knowledges, meanings and projects in dispute for a transition towards not only an ecological form of food production but also re-embedding food politics in societal values other than profit-maximization. It can also show how contextualized solutions to local problems might travel across different contexts and the adaptations and translations between ways of knowing and doing that take place in these processes.

## ◆ 2.2. Gender theoretical lenses and feminist epistemologies

Historically and in many world regions, gendered nutritional inequalities has been documented, with women and girls receiving lesser portions of food (Beardsworth and Keil 1996; Patel 2012). Beyond the focus on women and food consumption in the household, a gender-theoretical analysis of the food system equally unveils power inequalities at meso and macro-levels. At a macro-level, the concentration of power in corporations along the supply chain underscores hegemonic masculinities, with profit-driven logics and externalization of social and environmental impacts (Motta 2017; Patel 2012). A systematic bias conditions public credit on the purchase of proprietary seeds and chemical inputs, while women's agroecological knowledge and practices are invisibilized and left without technical support (Siliprandi 2015). The dissemination of processed food is at the heart of the political economy of obesity/NCDs (non-communicable diseases) (Swinburn et al. 2019). However, the state eschews regulation of corporate power and instead responsabilizes individuals for their diets on the one hand, and mothers for nutritional education on the other. Many authors agree that the solution lies in addressing gendered power inequalities in decision-making that affect agriculture and food policies (Allen and Sachs 2007; Patel 2012; Sachs and Patel-Campillo 2014). This also applies to the meso-level of organizations and social movements, in which women form the rank-and-file but rarely reach political offices from which they could influence state policies.

More than a women's issue, this is also a gendered dynamic that assigns some types of work economic and societal value, and invisibilizes other types of work, such as reproductive and care work. Such unequal division of labour follows gender lines but also other axes of inequalities and subaltern conditions, such as citizenship status. A gender-theoretical lens to analyse projects of transformation for shaping ecological food systems means incorporating key concepts developed

within gender theories as feminist political economy, feminist political ecology, black feminism, postcolonial feminism – such as social reproduction – care ethics, and intersectionality.

Gender theory and feminist political economy have conceptualized the domain of social reproduction as a set of necessary activities that are taken for granted for the so-called productive work in economies and markets: childbearing, feeding the family, taking care of the sick, the children and elderly, household gardening and food production for self-consumption; in short, reproducing life itself. Social reproduction is a concept that thus links processes of economic exploitation and gender oppression, connecting the structural orderings of capitalism and patriarchy [Mies and Shiva; Federici 2004]. Activities constituting social reproduction such as looking after children, the sick and elderly, have also been conceptualized as care work. This can be paid and unpaid, but is usually characterized by structural inequalities of gender, race and citizenship in the distribution of responsibilities. The recognition, rendering visible, and assignation of societal value to care work and the knowledge involved in care activities should be central to any feminist agenda. It is not merely a question of having the same status as masculinized domains that are identified as more valuable both economically and in terms of status. Far from essentializing care as a feminine attribute, feminist approaches to care strive for a radical transformation of the dominant gender order, which requires a change from the logic of exploitation towards a logic of care and responsibility for the other. Fraser [2008] claims that the ecological and the economic crises cannot be understood and faced without seeing their interconnections with a crisis of care. Despite the fact that social reproduction is necessary for capitalist accumulation, its contemporary dynamics are threatening the conditions of possibility of social reproduction, just as it is destabilizing the ecological possibilities of life on earth.

Studies on the gendered political economy of agrarian change [Agarwal 2014, Razavi 2009, Deere and Leon 2001] have called attention not only to gender inequalities in access to land and in food production, but to women's mobilization in challenging agrarian capitalism. In turn, feminist political ecology has further developed the connections between relations of domination in economic and social realms to gendered roles in struggles for access and control over environmental goods. Feminist political ecologies bring attention to the differentiated knowledges, practices and responsibilities in societal relations to nature according to gendered lines, including the role of women in practices of ecological care and in environmental mobilizations [Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, and Wangari 1996]. This applies to nature and the environment and also to food: a logic of care implies not treating food in instrumentalized ways for the purpose of human nourishment alone; it conceives of food as constituting webs-of-life to be cherished and maintained [De la Bellacasa 2017].

Lastly, intersectionality is one of feminism's strongest conceptual developments and highlights the ways in which gender is always also classed, racialized, and intersected with other differences. Coined by Black feminists in the USA to denounce difference and inequalities within what had been perceived as a unified feminist movement, intersectionality has a normative underpinning as a call for alliances that consider power differentials and take up a clear anti-racist instance within



Caravana Marcha das Margaridas, Belo Horizonte 2018  
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feminism [Crenshaw 1989]. Postcolonial feminisms have also challenged universalists assumptions behind transnational categories of the subject of feminism, such as global sisterhood and “the third world women”. An intersectional approach to researching food politics implies retaining such critical underpinnings within feminist epistemologies and struggles. It also expands their considerations to discuss the political subject of food politics and the categories of difference that become relevant in this topic. For instance, the coloniality of power in the food system can be seen in struggles for land and territorial rights in the Global South, in which the urban-rural difference becomes an important axis of inequalities [Motta and Teixeira 2021]. Socio-environmental transformation research in food can also profit from feminist epistemologies. Ecofeminism, political feminist ecology, environmental humanities and feminist posthuman approaches have also expanded such debates to include categorical differences and inequalities between society and nature, humans and non-humans. Inter-species intersectional approaches, for instance, include more-than-human others, such as animals, plants, bacteria, and ecologies.

There is a growing feminist food agenda in many agrarian movements, in particular through the alliance between the World March of Women and transnational peasant movements, combining an anti-capitalist and anti-patriarchal critique of the food system [Conway 2018; Masson, Paulos, and Bastien 2017; Nobre 2011]. More than a critique, a feminist agenda brings proposals for transforming food systems from the perspective of those that often are more marginalized within these debates. As such, such proposals entail a more radical and inclusive potential for transformation. Within food studies, more voices have been speaking out for a feminist food agenda. Sachs and Patel-Campillo [2014], for instance, suggest that feminist food justice involves at least three agendas. First, to support food production at multiple scales, through the promotion of access to land for women and dispossessed groups as well as state policies to promote food production by these

groups. Second, to revalue food work that feeds families, which would entail redefining gender roles, thus challenging the heteronormative household model and the gendered division of labor. This can take various forms, such as shifting food preparation to community kitchens, improving farm workers' rights, promoting the value of good food, and educating consumers about it. Third, the state's obligation to provide good food for everyone, taking into account food inequalities related to class, gender, race, and citizenship status. Preliminary findings from *Food for Justice* have identified a feminist contribution to food politics in five topics: 1) food as a right and a commons; 2) state support for food production by women; 3) recognition of uncommodified food work; 4) environmental care and recovery through agroecology; 5) violence-free food, produced through respectful social relations [Motta and Teixeira forthcoming].

In sum, decolonial and feminist epistemologies are necessary in transformation research because of their commitment to collecting various partial perspectives from different parts of the world, and in different social positionings, subaltern voices in particular. The construction of knowledge concerning global problems must establish global dialogues across differently situated knowledges [Haraway 1988]. The Junior Research Group Food for Justice aims to contribute to the research agenda on a knowledge-based bioeconomy which also draws on other knowledges, giving visibility to marginal yet potentially powerful strategies in the quest for food production with environmental rescue. *Food for Justice* inquires into which types of knowledges can contribute to building and embedding food in webs of relations in democratic, ecological and just ecologies and economies. Guided by feminist and anti-racist epistemologies, it will look at social movements that denounce relations of exploitation in food politics and transform these in relations of care and respect. It will also analyse how movements remain alert to the "Other question", i.e., who is included and who is left out?

# 3 | Global entangled food inequalities

Plenária ANA, Belo Horizonte 2018, © Renata Motta

Having situated the research problem within critical social scientific transformation research in food politics through the lenses of food movements, and building on the previous epistemological considerations, this section presents the concept of food inequalities. Starting with the concept of “entangled social inequalities”, defined as “the distances between positions, which individuals or groups of individuals assume in the context of a hierarchically organized access to relevant societal goods [income, wealth, etc.] and power resources [rights, political participation, political positions, etc.]” [Braig, Costa, and Göbel 2013, 2], *Food for Justice* will apply this to food and further incorporate the four premises brought together under the conceptual framework of global entangled inequalities [Jelin, Motta, and Costa 2017]. These are: 2.1.] multiple structural forces [socioeconomic, sociopolitical, socioecological, cultural and epistemic] producing hierarchical orderings in food politics; 2.2.] a multi-scalar and relational perspective, focusing on the interdependencies between phenomena at different levels, from global historical trends to local negotiations, bridging urban and rural spatialities; 2.3] plural and intersectional inequalities, affecting social groups categorised across different axes of inequalities, 2.4] dynamics of transformation.

## ◆ 3.1. Structural forces

Multiple structural forces produce hierarchical orderings that transverse relations of food production, commercialisation and consumption. Studies on the political economy of food and agriculture rely on historical accounts of the agrarian basis of the world economy, coining macro-concepts such as the world food system, global commodity chains [Hopkins and Wallerstein 1986], food regimes [Friedmann and McMichael 1989], and the agri-food system [Magdoff and Tokar 2010; Magdoff, Foster, and Buttel 2000]. The units of analysis are global patterns of food production and commercialisation, both of which are characterised by inequalities and power asymmetries among countries. Food security is a major topic in such studies. Magdoff et al. [2000], for instance, examine the paradox of increased food production with the simultaneous persistence of world hunger in the current agriculture-food system. The authors explain this paradox as a result of turning food production into a source of profit and the transformation of more farming inputs into a market product, reaching from the commodification of nature [patented



plants and animals] to the financialisation of food production and trade. Such explanations contrast and challenge arguments that technological fixes will lead to global food security [Herring 2010; Paarlberg 2013].

Also drawing from a world-systems perspective, Friedmann and McMichael [1989] coined the concept 'food regime' to denote dynamics of capitalist accumulation and power arrangements structuring relations of food production and consumption across world regions. Their work contextualizes food and agriculture within large historical processes, while bringing the key role of agriculture in the integration of world economy and the state-system. McMichael (2009) highlights the power of multinational corporations in the contemporary food regime, while others stress the role of the state in arbitrating disputes between corporations and rights claims from mobilised citizens [Pechlaner and Otero 2010; [Motta 2016](#)].

Global exchange of food is not only about market forces, it includes the cultural politics of food, in which competing forces are at play, namely, the homogenization of food cultures, on the one hand, and intercultural exchange, whereby food cultures also travel with the flow of peoples and crops, on the other [Gupta 2012]. Cultural and epistemological/structural forces are at play not only in shaping food consumption patterns and traditions, but also in the discursive construction of hunger in the institutional processes deployed in the policies to fight it. Equally, the persistence of hunger is not a matter of food production alone, it is also embedded in objects, types of power and forms of knowledge produced by strategies that are successfully devised in the struggle against it [Escobar 2011]. No less importantly, food security is not simply a matter of attending to the biological needs of bodies, it also involves respecting cultural definitions of what is considered as a proper meal and good food [Douglas 1972].<sup>8</sup>

The political ecology of food relates to the asymmetrical distribution of environmental goods and of environmental damage involved in relations of food production and consumption. The food regime connects distant ecologies across the globe, disembedding food consumption from the environment of its production, giving certain classes of consumers access to healthy and ecological diets, while loss of biodiversity, environmental and health damage from pesticide contamination, deforestation and processes of land dispossession are mostly concentrated at the production nodes of global commodity chains, affecting indigenous populations, black communities, and the rural poor in the Global South [Campbell 2009; Friedmann 2005; Lapegna, 2016]. The environmental impacts of global food relations are felt at the level of bodies in racialised, gendered and class-divided ways: the global food system is thus characterized by institutional racism, macro-dynamics of gendered inequalities, and a coloniality of power [Alkon and Agyeman 2011; Patel 2012]. The effects are tangible at the local level although the causes are global, and the impacts and responsibilities are asymmetrically distributed. In discussions of the Anthropocene, the role of hegemonic modes of food production, based on the large scale schemes of mastery over nature and exploitation of racialized labour have been conceptualized as Plantationocene [Haraway 2015].

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8 Some preliminary findings of Food for Justice related to this question have been presented here: Meinecke [2021].

Within environmental humanities and feminist posthumanist approaches, there is a warning to differentiate specific types of human-environmental relations in their responsibility for the climate crisis, and a call for an ethics of care [De la Bellacasa 2017; Braidotti 2013].

Conversely, food has its own agential power in generating other structural inequalities at the levels of bodies and life chances. For instance, malnutrition has a lifelong impact on the ability of an individual to fully participate in society and hence generates vital inequalities, as conceptualised by the sociologist Therborn [2014]. Neo-materialist perspectives in political ecology have also called attention to the power of food molecules such as fats and sugars in shaping bodies and their well-being [Bennett 2010]. Indeed, obesity and diabetes mark differences in bodies and have effects on people's life expectancies. Vital inequalities caused by food insecurity, malnutrition, obesity, usually affect more social groups with lower income, racialized groups and migrant minorities and women-led households.<sup>9</sup> More than food choices causing unhealthy lifestyles, these inequalities result from a structural uneven distribution of food environments, as poor neighbourhoods often lack access to affordable, quality food [Alkon and Agyeman 2011; Patel 2012].

In short, the multidimensionality of food inequalities is expressed in the structural patterns such as the political economy of agriculture, the cultural politics of food, political ecology of relations of food production and consumption, and structural oppressive human-nature orderings. Given also gendered macro-dynamics, the institutional racism and coloniality of power in the food system, access to good food and the distribution of life chances is uneven across differently embodied social groups.

## 3.2. A multi-scalar and relational spatial perspective

The dynamics of inequalities can be better analysed “from a multi-scalar and relational perspective, focusing on the interdependencies between phenomena at different levels, from global historical trends to local negotiations in communities and households. The premise is that even local patterns of inequalities are never isolated from national and international forces” [Jelin et al., 2017:6]. Current discussions on food security are problematic because they tend to focus on the macrolevel, in which food becomes an unspecified global problem, whereas the concrete dynamics of access to food are better observed by considering multiple scales of observation as well as the spatial units in which access to food is actually promoted. A multi-scalar approach connects macro-sociological phenomena such as global dynamics structuring food politics, networks of trade and information in food systems, homogeneous spatial infra-structures in agrarian commodity-extractions [ex. soyscapes, waterscapes] and meso and micro-phenomena, such as

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9 Some preliminary findings can be found at [Galindo et al. \(2021\)](#).

organizations and collective actors involved in disputes and material practices of space and place-making. Concept building will draw on the sociology of space [Löw 2016; Löw and Sturm 2019] and correlate disciplines within the spatial turn in social sciences, such as critical feminist geography, searching for conceptualizations of space not as geographical containers, but as relational and social processual ontologies, permeated by power relations and products of historical processes. Important concepts to be mobilized for this research include space, place, networks, translocality, politics of scale.

Global history scholars have studied the movements of peoples and crops across world regions, following migrants and their food cultures, as well as the incorporation of places, ecologies and peoples in plantation systems for an increasingly integrated world economy [Gupta 2012; Mintz 1986; Soluri 2009]. Sociologists and development scholars have traced the historical formation of global food regimes, including both market dynamics and international governance [Friedmann and McMichael 1989]. Transnational approaches have used units of analysis such as global value chains, as well as actor-centered approaches looking at economic corporations and activist networks in disputing food futures [Borras Jr. et al. 2008; Glover 2010; Gras and Hernández 2008; Schurman and Munro 2010]. The formation of food cultures and national cuisines as part of cultural identities – and the politics of recognition and conflicts over cultural appropriation involved – are mostly observed at national and regional scales [Appadurai 1988; Matta 2021]. The local scale, for its part, has received a lot of attention in studies on alternative food networks and community food systems [Goodman et al. 2012]. The romanticization of the local can be avoided by looking at the household scale, where light is shed on the gender inequalities involved in division of care work in food preparation or in nutritional inequalities between gender and generations. Food behaviour, political consumption and engagement in food issues can also be investigated by means of public opinion surveys in which the scale of observation is the individual. Finally, bodies and cells are also scales in which food matters, for instance, in neo-materialist approaches that investigate the agential properties of lipids [Bennett 2010] or in more-than-human scholarship looking at the structural interdependence or companionship between humans and other species such as fungi for instance [Haraway 2003, 2015; Tsing 2015].

In short, the research problem of the scales of transformation towards democratic, ecological and just food politics cannot be answered a priori. Some previous work and preliminary results within Food for Justice have taken up this debate in relation to the scales of actions from food movements, arguing against the global-local dichotomy, and the importance of retaining the national scale of analysis for justice claims, usually addressed to the national state [Borghoff Maia and Teixeira 2021; Motta 2016]. Food is not only multi-scale: it can also be thought of as related to different spatialities, a sort of bridge between these, such as rural and urban, waterscapes and forests, and other landscapes. *Food for Justice* will establish dialogues between rural sociology and urban sociology. A preliminary contribution in this direction can be found in Motta and Teixeira [2021], in which two main arguments are developed: the category of rurality or the urban-rural difference informs solidarity-building as bridging across boundaries of political identification and

bridging across scales. The identification with rurality or the Other-than-rural subject can connect socio-spatialities and diversity in ideas and practices of rurality.

### ◆ 3.3. Intersectionality

Third, inequalities are plural and intersectional, affecting social groups differently due to the specific interrelations of social categories such as class, race, gender, and citizenship. As a social phenomenon, the processes ranging from food production to waste are permeated by unequal power relations between different social groups. The concept of food inequalities decenters the abstract subject of food systems, such as the producer, the processor, the food retailers, and the consumer. Instead, the concept opens the analytical lenses for understanding how particularly situated subjects, namely, subjects marked by class, gender, race, and other axes of difference, engage in food politics. A first step was taken in the conceptual development of intersectional food inequalities [Motta 2021] by way of a literature review on food movements, structured in accordance with the analytical categories of class, gender, race, rurality, indigeneity, and the more-than-human. These represent the most visible faces of injustice and activism in food movements and are briefly summarized below.

The category of class is at the heart of many debates regarding the main drivers of transformation in the food system: does the locus of change lie in the dynamics of production and class struggle between peasants and large-scale capitalist farming or in the dynamics of consumption and the constitution of transnational classes of consumers, with the rich on green diets and the poor consuming industrial junk food? The gendered inequalities within the food system have been widely documented, as well as the paradox between women's responsibility in processes of food production and preparation versus their lack of power in decisions in food politics. However, while women do mobilize themselves in food movements, they do not always relate the struggle towards alternative food politics and to a feminist agenda of transformed gender relations. In many cases, however, food movements have been incorporating feminist agendas through alliances with feminist movements.

Both class-based movements and feminist food movements have, nevertheless, often neglected anti-racist struggles; not to mention the racial blindness of most alternative food initiatives aiming at localizing food systems or ecological products. Institutional racism, however, is a constitutive aspect of food systems and food movements run the risk of leaving this aspect unchallenged if they are not informed by a clear anti-racist instance. Racial categories, nevertheless, are not universals and there are different geographies in which the coloniality of power generated colonial difference, on the basis of which dispossession of land and rights were justified. Indigeneity and the urban-rural difference remain core categories of modernity/coloniality that reinforce inequalities in food politics to this day. Finally, the categorical difference between society and nature, as well as human and non-humans, has legitimized relations of exploitation that are challenged

by various food movements, ranging from veganism to agroecological movements, which in turn defend that more-than-humans are also entitled to rights, and see food as webs-of-life, which should be cherished and cared for.

Though the analysis singles out specific categories of inequality, these are discussed in their relation to other such categories. The intention is to build a framework in which these are assessed in their intersections, that is, as they include or exclude one another, rather than stacking them one on top of the other. Trying to remain faithful to the emancipatory origins of the concept of intersectionality in black feminist struggles, feminist epistemologies and political commitments to social change, the concept of food inequalities should also serve as a guide to assess exclusions and potentials for solidarity building across these movements, while always expanding itself to include emergent categories of inequalities.

### ◆ 3.4. Dynamics of transformation

Finally, addressing inequalities is at the heart of dynamics of transformation, including emancipatory struggles but they are equally at the centre of reactionary efforts to maintain the status quo. One of the pressing questions within sustainability studies and transformation research is why, despite a societal consensus on the need to change, transformation towards an ecological model does not take place [Blühdorn 2020]. Food offers a number of entry points to understand processes of social change, while also documenting the persisting patterns of structural phenomena, such as class and gender inequalities in food consumption. *Food for Justice* has co-edited a monograph on food and social change at the micro, meso and macro levels, focusing on food cultures and practices, activism around food, or state-led policies [Martín and Motta 2021]. Drawing on a long sociological theoretical tradition in conceptualizing social change, *Food for Justice* distances itself from the idea that food choices suffice to achieve environmental sustainability or fair trade, despite its increasing acceptance within middle and upper classes across the Global North and the Global South:

*“Market-led social change and the paradigm of instrumental rational individual choice can be an attractive option for those who can engage in those practices as well as for those who benefit from them directly, such as market niches, or indirectly, with the de-responsibilization of politics and market regulation for environmental protection and socio-economic rights. Although these processes do deserve scholarly attention, from a social sciences perspective, it is necessary to question the dominance of this paradigm choice in research on transformations, in food relations and beyond, situating it within broader debates and schools of thought on social change” (Motta and Martín 2021, 504).*

*Food for Justice* contributes to this research agenda by looking at alternative initiatives and mobilizations around food as a privileged instance to observe social change due to two reasons. First, food movements and alternative food initiatives are actively engaged in transforming food politics; second, they provide exceptional lenses to identify key dynamics of inequalities, identifying injustices related to food and constructing solutions to overcome these [Motta 2021]. Finally, the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic builds a scenario of crisis, constituting a contingent event that might fuel processes of transformation or further emphasise the entrenched interests that prevent social change. Therefore, *Food for Justice* will also draw on sociological debates on change, events, and contingency to understand the impacts of Covid-19 in disputed food futures.

### 3.5. Food Inequalities: a conceptual framework

Following these four premises, the concept of food inequalities will make sense of different dimensions and axes of inequalities, in various scales and spatialities, as well as their dynamics of reproduction and change in food politics. Guided by this concept, Food for Justice will investigate:

Food movements denouncing inequalities in socio-economic, environmental, political, cultural, and epistemological structural orderings;

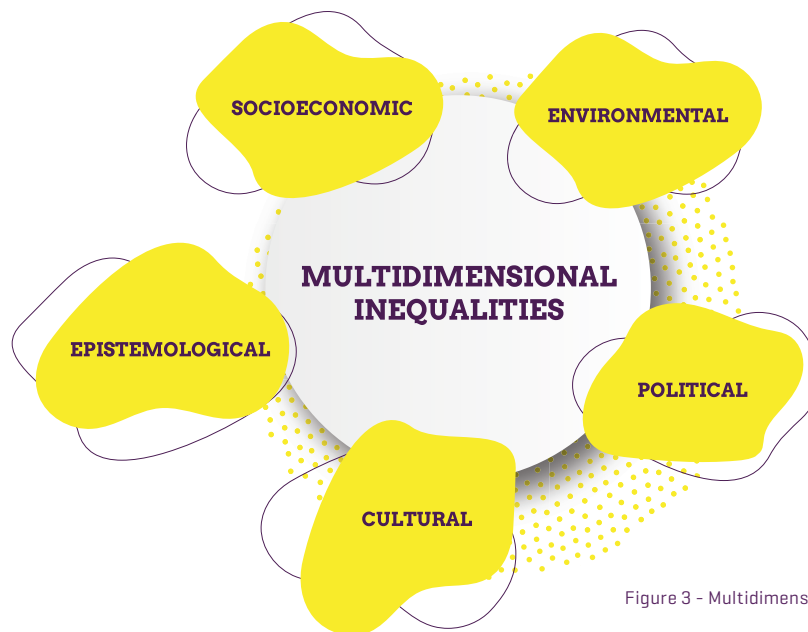


Figure 3 - Multidimensional inequalities.



# 4 | Preliminary research program and methods

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The broader research problem that Food for Justice addresses is: what projects of social change are aspired for, or are already underway, to transform a society based on exploitative food politics towards a society that fosters democratic, ecological and just food politics? This broader research problem will be specified in **four research questions:**

1. What are the main **justice claims** that mobilize citizens and consumers to denounce food inequalities and demand alternative food politics in different world regions?
2. Which **knowledges and technologies** are found within food movements that aim to overcome food inequalities and shape democratic, ecological and just food politics?
3. When are these alternative knowledges and technologies able to influence food politics in general, and **public policies**, in particular?
4. How have multiple crises (sanitary, societal, economic, political) associated with the **Covid-19 pandemic** exacerbated and visibilized food inequalities, or provided windows of opportunity for change in food politics?

These four research questions will be analysed empirically in food movements in two world regions; Europe, with focus on Germany, and; Latin America, predominantly in Brazil. Whenever possible, case studies from other countries in these world regions will be included.<sup>10</sup> Five criteria have guided the selection of these two countries as the empirical context for the case studies. First, there is a need to bridge the gap in food studies and transformation research between empirical analyses and theoretical debates in the Global North and of the Global South. By building knowledge that connects, and establishes a dialogue between, world regions, such a research design can contribute to a global sociology of food and transformation research. Second, Germany and Brazil are giant players on the global food market in terms of agrarian production and export as well as in the food industry. The fact that they are highly competitive continues to depend on the political influence of agribusi-

<sup>10</sup> This can be realized through the incorporation of associated and guest researchers. In this sense, some preliminary work has already been conducted on Chile. See: Calcagni [2021].



ness interests; it is achieved at the expense of taxpayers in the form of credits and subsidies; and their environmental record is far from ideal (Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2017). Therefore, this combination of a “successful” model of food production and export on the one hand, with the high, yet invisibilized, political, social and environmental costs of such success, on the other, make these two countries primary examples of the challenges in building democratic, ecological and just food politics.

Third, Germany and Brazil exhibit a dual structure in their agriculture, in which a dominant large-scale export-oriented sector, and a family farming sector linked to regional and national markets coexist. This duality is reproduced in separate political representations, in which powerful agribusiness organizations represent the interests of largescale farming, while smaller organisations from family farmers and peasants demand specific agrarian policies for their sector. These two factors together – being a key figure in global agribusiness and having a dual structure in agriculture – present similar context conditions that create common dilemmas regarding the agrarian and food futures of the two countries: a hegemonic model is not unchallenged and there is a dispute, albeit asymmetric, to shape future trajectories. This is related to a fourth factor: Germany and Brazil stand out in their multifaceted expressions of food activism, from agrarian movements to political consumption and across urban and rural divides, including large national mobilisations in the last quarter of the century.

The fifth criteria in selecting Germany and Brazil as empirical bases from which to select the case studies is constituted by the clear differences between them vis-à-vis access to food. They display varied scenarios of food inequalities. Germany does not have a record of food insecurity and is a wealthy country. Nevertheless, rising poverty rates and social inequality are associated with malnutrition and what has been called hidden hunger.<sup>11</sup> Brazil, by contrast, shows high levels of social inequality and poverty; it has always been on the world hunger map. In 2014, the country was removed from this map for the first time after reducing extreme food insecurity to less than 5% of the population. After ten years of continuous progress, the levels of food insecurity started to rise again in 2017-2018, which only worsened under the Covid-19 pandemic, when almost 60% of the households were living in situations of food insecurity (Galindo et al. 2021). These changes took place in a period in which agrarian production grew steadily, which shows that food production does not automatically translate into food security. Rather, the policies that successfully contributed to improved indicators in food security in Brazil reflected a political priority of fighting hunger and malnutrition. This has been achieved through the governmental purchase, commercialisation and distribution of food from family farmers in a context of economic growth. An increased focus on addressing the social determinants of hunger and malnutrition has also been important, particularly, the goal of poverty reduction through a real increase in the minimum wage, pensions and social benefits, as well as cash transfer programmes. As such, more attention needs to be given to the social and political changes necessary to achieve

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11 According to the Bundesanstalt für Landwirtschaft und Ernährung (BLE) (2021), 15% of children and youth are affected by malnutrition and 6% by obesity in Germany. Numbers are almost three times higher for children living in families with low socio-economic status and poverty rates are rising (Der Paritätische Gesamtverband 2020). The connection of poverty and rising levels of hunger in developed countries has been called hidden hunger (Biesalski 2013). FAO (2021) estimated that in Germany, 4.1% of the population are moderately and severely food insecure.

food security, in opposition to a short-sighted focus on plant research and increasing production.

Five case studies were selected to answer the research questions. Two case studies address research question 1. **Case Study 1 Wir haben es satt!** looks at the campaign *Meine Landwirtschaft* [My Agriculture] in Germany, a broad coalition of more than 50 NGOs and social movements that has been organising an annual protest march called *Wir haben es satt!* [We are fed up!] since 2011. It has mobilised between 18,000 and 50,000 people from across the country to Berlin to demand agrarian and food change. **Case Study 2 Marcha das Margaridas** [Daisies' March] is a coalition of women's movements for an alternative model of rural development, social policies and women's rights that incorporates demands such as food sovereignty and agroecology. It is organised by rural trade unions in partnership with agrarian and feminist movements and has taken place six times since the year 2000, bringing women from across Brazil to the national capital. Such broad coalitions between social movements, informed citizens, consumers and organised civil society groups in Brazil and Germany leave no doubt as to the political dimension of food. However, they also show differences in what are considered the main injustices in the food system, while excluding other dimensions. For instance, whereas feminist agendas and topics such as worker's rights appear to be more integrated in food movements in Brazil, issues of animal rights and political consumption are more visible in German food movements.

Two case studies were selected to address research question 2: **Case Study 3 Alternative Food Networks** [AFNs] maps community supported agriculture in Germany, which are known as *Solidarische Landwirtschaft* [Solawi, or solidarity agriculture], as well as other initiatives that establish alternative forms of relations between production and consumption.<sup>12</sup> **Case Study 4 Articulação Nacional de Agroecologia** [ANA or National Agroecological Articulation] addresses a network of experiences in agroecology in Brazil, comprising rural social movements, urban agriculture, self-organised neighbourhoods in poor suburbs, household gardens, and feminist movements.

Addressing research question 3, **Case Study 5 Local food system in the city of Belo Horizonte** focuses on policy innovations at the local level, the metropolitan region of Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brazil. Since the implementation of an integrated approach to food security in the 1990s, the city has been identified as a model case for promoting the human right to food and has been show-cased at FAO publications [FAO 2018, 72; see also Giordano et al. 2018, in the frame of the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact].

Finally, due to the emergence of the health crisis and its correlated social and economic challenges, the research question "how has the Covid-19 pandemic contributed to increased visibilization, exacerbation or reduction of food inequalities?" was included in the project. In order to address the question, **a series of case studies under the umbrella Case Studies on Covid-19 Pandemics and Food Inequalities** will be included. Whereas in Brazil, there is evidence of food insecurity on the

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12 Some preliminary work on this case study has been presented by Masson and Meinecke [2021].

rise, especially for poorer households, led by women or black persons (Galindo et al. 2021), the vulnerabilities seem to be different in Germany, such as the situation of migrant workers in the food industry and farmer's workers (Küppers 2021). In both countries, the impacts of the pandemic food inequalities will be analysed, as well as how food movements and alternative food networks have adapted to the pandemics and disputed the openings for reform and transformation in food politics.



Figure 7 - Research questions and case studies

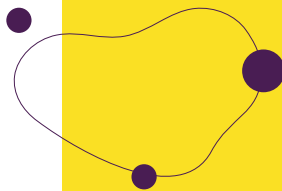


Marcha das Margaridas, Brasília 2019 © Renata Motta

## 4.1. Methods

The research questions demand different types of data collection and analysis, and accordingly, a multi-methods approach of both quantitative and qualitative data was chosen. Thus, the main demands and justice claims in food movements will be assessed through protest surveys, qualitative interviews, document analysis, and participant observation in ethnographic research with social movements. Knowledges and technologies in alternative food networks and agroecological movements will be first mapped and then further studied with interviews and participant observation. Policy innovations within the local level will be investigated through interviews with experts, policy makers, and ethnographical work following the state-society interactions. The impacts of Covid-19 pandemic on food inequalities will be assessed through a combination of public opinion surveys on food insecurity, discourse analyses of newspaper articles covering food and pandemic, as well as digital ethnography and interviews with social movements and alternative food networks in their strategies to react to the pandemic. For all case studies, there will be the collection of data such as documents, social media, and visual materials, also drawing on the opportunities for digital ethnographies.

In addition to the findings for each case study, the interconnections are analysed and elaborated at the theoretical and methodological level. A mixed methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative data is considered particularly useful for research on complex global problems, but there are a few concrete concepts that allow data collection, data analysis and research design to be integrated, thus validating the complementarity of the different methodological approaches [Warde 2014]. Food for Justice strives to contribute to this kind of methodological synthesis and, theoretically, to transformation research in which social change from below is also taken into account in shaping democratic, ecological and just food politics at all scales. Empirically, it will search for instances in which social inequalities in food politics have been successfully tackled, bridging dimensions, scales and axis of inequalities.



## MULTI-METHODS APPROACH OF QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE DATA

What are the main **JUSTICE CLAIMS** that mobilize citizens and consumers to denounce food inequalities and demand alternative food politics in different world regions?

PROTEST SURVEYS

QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Which **KNOWLEDGES AND TECHNOLOGIES** are found within food movements that aim to overcome food inequalities and shape ecological, fair and democratic food politics?

MAPPING

QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY

When are these alternative knowledges and technologies able to influence food politics in general, and **PUBLIC POLICIES**, in particular?

SURVEY

INTERVIEWS WITH EXPERTS

INTERVIEWS WITH POLICY MAKERS

ETHNOGRAPHICAL WORK FOLLOWING THE STATE-SOCIETY INTERACTIONS

DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHIES

How have multiple crises [sanitary, societal, economic, political] associated with the **COVID-19 PANDEMIC** exacerbated and visibilized food inequalities, or provided windows of opportunity for change in food politics?

PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY

DISCOURSE ANALYSES OF NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHIES

Figure 8 - Research questions and Methods


# 5 | Expected contributions and outcomes

Visita técnica ao Sítio Ibirité, Belo Horizonte 2017 © Renata Motta

The Junior Research Group Food for Justice, as part of the [German] Federal Ministry of Education and Research Call “Bioeconomy as Societal Change”, locates its research agenda within the goal, set by the German National Research Strategy for Bioeconomy [NRSB], to eradicate hunger and malnutrition and guarantee food security on a global scale. Food for Justice situates such goals beyond issues of food production and technological innovation and is determined to approach the complexity of transformations necessary to address global entangled inequalities at the core of the problem. It thus points towards issues of power and the political disputes over food futures. This requires a systemic approach, taking into account cross-sectional issues and networks that overcome current boundaries of urban and rural; nature and society; local and global. Learning from experiences of crises and adaptation both in the Global South and the Global North, the Junior Research Group strives to discover innovative practices that deal with the inequalities that undermine food security, suggesting how these might travel and under which conditions, considering their contextual and adaptive character. Furthermore, it seeks to contribute to public policies, inform new mentalities and practices, and identify technological and social needs to ensure not only food security but democratic, ecological and just food politics.

## **Food for Justice aims to achieve the following academic outcomes:**

- a) to consolidate a broader approach to food security and the bioeconomy agenda in Germany within the perspective of critical social sciences. This includes research topics such as social inequalities and social change, and contributions from environmental sociology, the sociology of space as well as interdisciplinary fields, such as science and technology studies, gender studies, and decolonial studies;
- b) to articulate research fields that have often talked past each other under the umbrella of food studies, which is still an incipient area in the German scientific landscape [Reiher and Sippel 2015];
- c) to develop the concept of food inequalities as a contribution to social scientific research on social inequalities;



d) to develop theoretical and methodological contributions to transformation research, with a focus on socio-environmental change;

e) to contribute to decolonial theory and method by linking case studies from the Global North and the Global South, adopting a decolonial and feminist perspective.

In terms of practical-relevant outcomes, Food for Justice aspires to:

a) identify socially demanded and accepted solutions to conflicts between the goals of food production, environmental protection and climate change, due to agriculture having an ambivalent role at these crossroads;

b) identify knowledges and technologies that already respond to complex problems such as producing waste-free, healthy, environmentally friendly, and just food that benefits both producers and consumers;

c) identify, based on empirical studies, policy-relevant challenges and opportunities for shaping social transformations of food systems with social, ecological and global justice;

d) offer analytical tools to assess the transnational impacts of the German National Bioeconomy Strategy, as well as learning from successful experiences in South America, by systematically comparing case studies across world regions and tracing their transnational connections;

e) provide policy-relevant information and recommendations to cooperation agencies in Germany working on projects to guarantee food security.

In sum, Food for Justice aims to make an empirically-grounded and theoretically elaborated contribution to pressing academic, political and policy debates concerning the relationships between food, democracy, justice and the environment. By challenging mainstream imaginaries embedded in Malthusian formulations on the problem of “feeding the world”, Food for Justice aspires to contribute to the collective construction of imaginaries of the future by investigating variously situated responses to the question of “which food politics does society want?”. Based on this knowledge, the project expects to contribute to discussions on how to shape democratic, ecological, and just food futures.

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