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Food and Inequality

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Keywords

agriculture, food access, food justice, food sovereignty, inequality, intersectionality

Abstract

The production, consumption, materiality, and meanings of food are critical topics for sociological research on inequality, although they have not always been recognized as such. This article describes how food is implicated in the production of inequalities across scales and sites. It begins by considering how the global food system is inextricably imbricated with structures of power that create and sustain patterns of inequality, especially in regard to land and labor. It then reviews the literature on food access and food insecurity, not only as determinants of health but as lived experiences shaped by local food environments, intersectional identities, and the social meanings of food. Lastly, it considers how the food justice and food sovereignty movements challenge the inequalities and injustices engendered by the global industrial food system. The conclusions highlight how sociological research on food and inequality is essential to understanding the contexts and consequences of contemporary policy initiatives.

INTRODUCTION

Even a brief survey makes clear that agriculture and food were central to the discipline of sociology's foundational theoretical and empirical concerns. As early social theorists sought to explain the emergence of industrialization, they often began by considering changes to the agrarian sector, including agricultural enclosure, land dispossession, the creation of a class of propertyless wage laborers, and the commodification of food (Colás et al. 2018, Lobao & Meyer 2001). The shift from agrarian- to industrial-based societies likewise was the basis for early sociological inquiries into the differences between rural and urban ways of life, focused not only on modes of production but also on anticipated transformations in social relationships, traditions, and values (Wuthnow 2015). Relatedly, empirical sociological research has its roots in detailed, multimethod social studies of Black Americans in rural and urban communities that were being transformed by large scale social changes, many of which—e.g., labor, land ownership, migration—were related to agriculture and food[1] (Du Bois 1898, 1899).

Despite its centrality to the origins of the discipline, and even as agriculture has been a consistent focus of rural sociologists, research on food remained relatively marginal within mainstream sociology. In the early 1990s, sociologists published path-breaking studies of gender and food in families (DeVault 1991) and of the routinization of work in fast food restaurants (Leidner 1993). Nonetheless, in the mid-1990s, sociologists described food as a "terrain that all but cries out for sociological cultivation," asking "why is there no sociology of food?" (Ferguson & Zukin 1995, p. 193) and describing "sociology's relative neglect of such issues" as "something of a puzzle" (Beardsworth & Keil 1997, p. 2). At about this time, there was a dramatic expansion of scholarly writing about food across disciplines; this was likely motivated by a combination of factors, including the contributions of feminism and women's studies, which legitimized research into a domain long associated with women and the family (DeVault 1991); concerns about health, diet-related illnesses, and the safety of food (Schlosser 2001); heightened awareness of and interest in food politics, locally and globally (Nestle 2002); and the multiple ways that cooking and dining were becoming visible foci of popular culture (Counihan & Van Esterik 2008). By 2005, food studies had "arrived" in the form of an intensely interdisciplinary field (Ferguson 2005, p. 679).

Over the past two decades, food has received increasing attention from across the discipline. In 2019, sociologists established a Coalition for Food and Agricultural Sociology, which seeks to promote the voices and research of sociologists and activists doing work on food and agricultural systems. In early 2021, motivated, in part, by how the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted inequities in food access, the American Sociological Association dedicated an issue of *Footnotes* (Vasishtha 2021) to research on food and society, highlighting the importance of understanding the "range of social justice issues that stem from the ways in which our food system works."

This is the first review focused on food ever to appear in this journal.[2] As such, it aims broadly to make the case that the production, consumption, materiality, and meanings of food are critical topics for sociological research on inequality, although they have not always been recognized as such (Fielding-Singh 2021). Following the principles of deeply intersectional scholarship, it centers on recent sociological research that makes visible interlocking structures of power and domination across a multiplicity of social locations, acknowledges differences in experiences both between and within social groups, considers the systems and processes through which inequalities are produced and maintained, and examines how these operate and are experienced across scales of social organization (Malin & Ryder 2018). Indeed, one of the remarkable things about food is precisely its relationships to inequalities across scales, from the structures of the global industrial food system (McMichael 2009) to molecular processes within the cells of our bodies (Landecker 2011).

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[1] Early sociologists wrote much less about the act of eating. An exception is a 1910 newspaper article, by Georg Simmel, entitled "The Sociology of the Meal," in which he made the case that while the need for food is a "primitive physiological fact," how we eat, and especially how we eat together, is a sociological matter (in Symons 1994, pp. 346–47).

[2] By comparison, since 2000, the *Annual Review of Anthropology* has published 10 reviews focused on different dimensions of food.

Sociologists working in a variety of subfields have made critical contributions to our understandings of the multiple and multi-scalar relationships between food and inequality. To make visible this range of innovative and important sociological research, the review is quite broad, encompassing an array of topics that arguably each warrants its own essay.[3] It proceeds in three main sections. The first describes how the food system is inextricably imbricated with structures of power that create and sustain patterns of penalty and privilege, globally and locally. The second considers food access and food insecurity, both as determinants of health and as lived experiences shaped by local food environments, intersectional identities, and the social meanings of food. The third centers on how the food justice and food sovereignty movements are challenging the inequalities and injustices engendered by the global industrial food system. The conclusions highlight how sociological research on food and inequality is essential to understanding the contexts and consequences of major contemporary policy initiatives.

PRODUCING FOOD AND INEQUALITY

The production of food happens in and through social structures, ideologies, and practices shaped by intersecting power relations (Collins 2000), including racial capitalism, colonialism, and nationalism. While these systems are instantiated in global and national laws, policies, and practices, they are often experienced locally in relationships to land and labor. Across scales, sociological research demonstrates that the food system has long been central to the creation and maintenance of inequalities in people's lives and life chances.

Food Regimes

An early and influential approach to theorizing food systems, food regimes analysis is a political economic perspective that articulates the strategic role of agriculture and food in the construction of the world capitalist economy. A food regime is a rule-governed structure of production and consumption of food on a world scale (McMichael 2009). Studying the emergence, maintenance, and demise of food regimes offers a means of historicizing (and politicizing) the global food system and examining how key contradictions in specific regimes produce crisis, transformation, and transition. In this way, the food regime concept invites analysis of the relationships between nation-states, markets, developments in science and technology, and social movements in creating and reproducing the global food system, including its contradictions and crises (Colás et al. 2018).

As well, food regime analyses offer a way of articulating how food production and consumption are deeply intertwined with structures of inequality. Settler colonialism, plantation agriculture, and forced labor under chattel slavery were central components of the first "colonial diasporic" food regime (McMichael 2009). A second food regime, which began after World War II, was implemented through both US foreign policy and a growing structure of international trade policies that "rerouted flows of (surplus) food from the United States to its informal empire of postcolonial states on strategic perimeters of the Cold War"; this regime also included the commodification of chemicalized agricultural inputs (e.g., pesticides, herbicides, fertilizers, feed); the consolidation of agriculture into large scale, monocultural farms; and the reliance of growers on similarly consolidated systems of distribution (McMichael 2009, p. 141). This consolidation of agriculture and the associated "exodus of Americans from farming" have been among the "most dramatic changes in US economy and society" in the past century (Lobao & Meyer 2001, p. 103). While there is some debate about the contours of the third corporate food regime, it refers broadly to the current period in which a bifurcated food system provides abundant food to the world's wealthy populations while global working and poor populations, including those who labor within the food system, experience crises caused by recurring food shortages, high prices, and exposure to unhealthy foods (Hatch 2019).

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[3] To maintain brevity, this review draws mostly on recent scholarship (2000–2022). While the US context is a primary focus, the global structure of the industrial food system and the contributions of scholars and activists from around the world to sociological understandings of food and inequality are considered throughout.

Landscapes of Inequality

While food regimes are global, they both generate and depend upon "regionalized agricultural racial formations" (Minkoff-Zern 2019, p. 51). In the United States, these formations have been deeply connected to ideologies and practices of settler colonialism and racial capitalism. Over time, and through varied mechanisms, they have created and maintained deep inequalities in regard to both land ownership and labor.

The American agricultural landscape, which since the nation's founding has been central to its narrative, identity, and economy (Wuthnow 2015), was created through historic and ongoing processes of settler colonialism (Whyte 2019). Indigenous residents of the land have been displaced by genocide, forced removal, relocation, and containment practices, which disrupted and destroyed Indigenous food systems; at the same time, settlers made claims to land through processes of commodification and privatization (Glenn 2015, McKay et al. 2020). Over time, vast amounts of land were transferred from "Indian to non-Indian hands, and land management practices shifted from activities geared toward food production," which historically had strengthened social relationships and cultural continuity in Indigenous communities, "to those that would achieve profits under capitalism" (Norgaard 2019, p. 58). Indigenous communities continue to be denied access to traditional foods, as a direct consequence of state land management policies (e.g., dam building, agricultural clearing, fire suppression, fishing bans) and their failure to protect the natural environment from contamination, degradation, and the impacts of climate change (Hoover & Mihesuah 2019, Norgaard 2019, Whyte 2019).

Ideologies and practices of racialized exploitation and exclusion also have been central to labor in the food system. In the United States, these dynamics can be traced from plantation agriculture with its dependence on chattel slavery (Mintz 1986) to the post-emancipation "Black codes," sharecropping system, and terrorism that created a "restricted Black workforce which would reflect the labor system of slavery as much as possible" (Minkoff-Zern 2019, p. 34; see also White 2018).

The food system of the United States also has relied on a succession of underpaid immigrant laborers (Sbicca et al. 2020). Today, Latinx immigrants do much of the precarious, difficult and often dangerous work of cultivating, harvesting, and processing food (Holmes 2013, Horton 2016, Schwartzman 2013). According to the most recent National Agricultural Workers Survey, 70% of hired crop workers were born in Mexico and an estimated 50% do not have legal authorization to work in the United States (Castillo et al. 2021). Undocumented farm workers are made vulnerable to exploitation both by policies that criminalize their presence in the country (i.e., putting them at constant risk of deportation) and by policies that, in many states, exempt them from the protections of labor laws and safety net programs; at the same time, they are exposed to multiple chemical, physical, biological, and psychosocial hazards (Castillo et al. 2021). Meanwhile, Latinx immigrants who seek to transition from farm workers to farm owners are inhibited from ascending the "agrarian class ladder" by institutionalized racism, cultural exclusion, and a dominant industrial farming model that does not support small holding farmers (Minkoff-Zern 2019, p. 57).

In many large metropolitan areas, Latinx immigrants also work the majority of back-of-the-house jobs in restaurants (Wilson 2018a). These are typically low-wage, manual-labor positions, such as cooking, dishwashing, and bussing tables, that offer limited job benefits, little employment security, and few opportunities for advancement (Wilson 2018a; see also Fine 2008). Multiple factors, including the biases of hiring managers, often based in racialized and stereotyped ideas about Latinx workers, and the social networks of immigrants contribute to segregated occupational niches in restaurant work (Wilson 2018a), even as some 1.5th- and second-generation immigrants find ways to build mobility ladders within the restaurant industry (Wilson 2018b).

Institutionalized racism—including bias in federal policies and their implementation at the local level—also has systematically undermined the success of Black, Indigenous, and people of color farmers in the United States. In 1999, African American farmers in the *Pigford v. Glickman* (2000) case, who claimed that they were discriminated against by local US Department of Agriculture (USDA) county committees when they applied for farm loans or assistance and that the USDA had been unresponsive to their reports of biased treatment, were awarded what was then the largest civil rights settlement in US history. A subsequent legislative process allocated an additional $1.25 billion for eligible farmers whose claims were not settled in the original consent decree (CRS 2013). In 2010, the settlement agreement for *Keepseagle v. Vilsack* (2015), a case that Native American farmers brought against the USDA in the wake of the *Pigford* settlement, made $680 million available to eligible class members to compensate for their discrimination claims and to provide debt forgiveness and tax relief. In 2013, faced by another class-action lawsuit, the USDA admitted discrimination against Hispanic farmers and established a claims process; research suggests, however, that very few (∼6%) claims are being approved (Minkoff-Zern 2019, p. 64). While these settlements are significant, a recent economic analysis estimates the lost intergenerational wealth associated with Black land loss, from 1920–1997, at $326 billion (Francis et al. 2022).

As detailed in the third section of this article, alternative food movements have sought to bring "ethical conventions back into circulation" and thereby challenge "the environmental and social degradation of market forces, which treat land and labor as commodities" (Besky & Brown 2015, p. 23). As well, activists and scholars have called attention to pervasive structural inequalities in access to healthy food.

FOOD ACCESS: LOCAL FOOD ENVIRONMENTS, INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITIES, AND THE MEANINGS OF FOOD

Understanding barriers to food access and their health and social consequences are shared foci of the fields of sociology and public health. Sociologists have demonstrated that once food has been produced and processed, it is distributed through complex infrastructures, which often have profound, if inadvertent, implications for inequality (Deener 2020). As described below, how to conceptualize the histories, structures, and effects of local food environments are important and contested questions, especially given critiques of the food desert concept.

Alongside research on food environments, sociologists study food insecurity, defined by the USDA (2022) as "a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food." The USDA (2022) distinguishes food insecurity from the experience of hunger, which refers to individual experiences of discomfort, illness, weakness, or pain caused by food insecurity. Research that examines whether high-income households have a more nutritious diet than low-income households may also use standardized measures of dietary quality, such as the USDA's Healthy Eating Index, to assess nutritional inequality (Fielding-Singh 2021). This approach reflects a growing recognition that nutrition—and not just calories—is essential to individual and population health (Seligman & Berkowitz 2019).

Social scientists have raised important questions, however, about how notions of "healthy food" may be used in ways that are "racist, neoliberal, and punitive," especially insofar as they devalue Black food cultures and practices as "deficient or deviant" (Garth 2020, p. 124). Similarly, studies of health among First Nations peoples "rarely start with Indigenous perspectives on health, theorize the impacts of colonialism on Indigenous physical or mental health, or account for how health practitioners and researchers themselves enact colonial violence on communities" (Norgaard 2019, p. 225). Such critiques highlight the importance of considering intersectional identities and the social meanings of food as important aspects of food security.

Local Food Environments

The term "food desert" was reportedly coined by a resident of public housing in Scotland in the early 1990s and then appeared in a 1995 report by a UK Department of Health nutrition task force (Kolb 2021). The USDA (2009) defines food deserts as "area[s] with limited access to affordable and nutritious foods, particularly such an area composed of predominantly lower-income neighborhoods and communities." Food deserts became a major focus of public health and social science research, not least because they were at the center of multimillion-dollar initiatives to improve healthy food access and diet-related public health outcomes (Cummins et al. 2014).

Academic and policy interest in food deserts was supported by a burgeoning interdisciplinary literature that used geospatial techniques to assess food access and its relationships to health (Shannon et al. 2021). Focusing most often on the distance between places of residence and the presence of a grocery store, these studies typically found that people living in low-income communities and communities of color are less likely to have access to a fully stocked grocery store (Walker et al. 2010). Research also indicated that low-income urban communities are more likely to have abundant fast-food outlets and convenience stores, with scholars suggesting that the term "food swamp" therefore more accurately describes "areas with a high-density of establishments selling high-calorie fast food and junk food, relative to healthier food options" (Cooksey-Stowers et al. 2017). The concept of a "food mirage" emerged from analyses that identified locations in which grocery stories are present, but the high price of healthy food nonetheless makes it inaccessible to low-income households (Breyer & Voss-Andreae 2013, p. 131). The focus of spatial analyses on the supply-side dynamics underlying food access was welcomed by scholars and policy makers as an alternative to individualized explanations for observed inequalities which blamed food-insecure people for not making healthy food choices (Alkon et al. 2013, Minkoff-Zern 2014).

Quasi-experimental studies of the effects of opening new grocery stores in designated food deserts, however, have indicated that "simply building new food retail stores may not be sufficient to promote behavior change related to diet" (Cummins et al. 2014, p. 289). At least in the short term—i.e., 6 months to a year after opening—new grocery stores appear to improve neighborhood residents' perceptions of food access, but without significant effects on household availability or intake of healthy foods (Cummins et al. 2014, Elbel et al. 2015). One study did find significant improvements not only in perceptions of food access but also in a variety of diet-related measures among people residing in a community with a new grocery store; the diet-related outcomes, however, were not associated with utilization of the new store (Dubowitz et al. 2015). The observations that many residents of food deserts were already shopping at grocery stores—albeit at a greater distance from their homes—and that grocery stores provide abundant access to unhealthy foods are among the explanations for the limited effects of new grocery stores as a public health intervention (Allcott et al. 2019, Vaughan et al. 2017). Additionally, sociological research has found that people's choices about where to shop are shaped not only by geographic proximity to stores but by their patterns of movement through the day (e.g., on commutes to/from work, school, childcare, etc.); critical evaluations of food costs and quality; perceptions of store owners, staff, and clientele;

and preferences for specific foods associated with their identities and cultures (Bowen et al. 2019, Ewoodzie 2021, Mayorga et al. 2022, Shannon et al. 2021).

Scholars and activists also offer broader critiques of the food desert concept. To begin, sociologists point out that in their rather singular focus on grocery stores, policy makers failed to attend to poverty and racism as fundamental causes of inequities in both food access and health (Alkon et al. 2013, Bowen et al. 2021a, Kolb 2021). Food justice activists and scholars also have criticized the concept of food deserts as a term most often assigned to communities from the outside rather than honoring "community-based assessments of their own conditions. . .and community-based assertions of their own power and solutions" (quoted in Reese 2019, p. xi). Rather than conceiving of people living in designated food deserts as "social or political risk objects" (Reese & Garth 2020, p. 8), they emphasize that people "can (and regularly do) transform their own food environment. . ." (Hassberg 2020, p. 308). Relatedly, although some public health frameworks position obesity prevention as the primary reason to build supermarkets in underserved neighborhoods, social scientists have emphasized that responding to communities' preferences for high-quality food retail and other amenities should be a priority from the perspectives of social, economic, and environmental justice (Carter 2016, Kolb 2021, Satcher 2022). Such reframings are supported by important new sociological studies of people's lived experiences of food access and how these are shaped by intersectional inequalities.

Food Access and the Embodiment of Intersectional Inequalities

The multiple ways that the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the food system and created barriers to food access greatly exacerbated the problem of food insecurity in the United States (Bowen et al. 2021a, Morales et al. 2021). Even before the pandemic, however, one out of ten households in the United States (10.5%) was classified as food insecure, meaning they did not have "consistent, dependable access to enough food for active, healthy living" (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2020, p. v). By April 2020, 23% of US households were experiencing food insecurity; this estimate, however, masks racialized inequities, as 34% percent of Latinx households and 29% of Black-headed households were food insecure, compared with 18% of White-headed households (Bowen et al. 2021a). Such racialized inequities precede the pandemic, as food insecurity among Black- and Latinx-headed households had been approximately double that of White households (Bowen et al. 2021a). As well, other sociodemographic characteristics of food insecure households have been largely consistent over time, with households with children (especially children under the age of six years), households headed by a single adult (especially by single women), adults living alone, and low-income households especially at risk (Seligman & Berkowitz 2019). There is also geographic variation in household food insecurity, with higher rates found in the South and in rural and urban (as compared with suburban and exurban) communities (Seligman & Berkowitz 2019).

Food insecurity is associated with a myriad of negative health and social consequences. When children experience food insecurity, it negatively effects their overall health status; food-insecure children generally experience 2–4 times as many health problems as do other children within the same income bracket (Cook et al. 2013) and are at higher risk of being hospitalized (Gundersen & Ziliak 2015). Food insecurity is also associated with behavioral challenges and negative academic outcomes, for both children and adolescents (Kimbro & Denney 2015). Adults experiencing food insecurity are at increased risk of mental health problems, poor sleep, and a host of diet-related health conditions (Gundersen & Ziliak 2015). More severe and long-lasting experiences of food insufficiency and hunger are associated with more severe impacts on mental health (Allen et al. 2018, Nagata et al. 2021). Likely as a consequence of gendered expectations about maternal food work, food insecurity is associated with anxiety and depression especially for mothers; these may persist long after the episode of food insecurity (Ciciurkaite & Brown 2017). As well, research has shown that in order to protect their children from hunger and nutritional deprivation, mothers adopt strategies that are likely to undermine their own health over time, including skipping meals, waiting to eat until later in the day, and/or eating less (Martin & Lippert 2012).

As it is measured in the United States, food insecurity is a household-level characteristic associated with the financial ability to afford adequate food (Seligman & Berkowitz 2019). To be sure, the cost of food is central to how people make decisions about food purchasing, especially in the context of limited financial resources (DiSantis et al. 2013, MacNell et al. 2017). In the past several years, however, ethnographic and interview studies have demonstrated that food prices are subjectively interpreted in processes of food provisioning, especially as individuals and families navigate multiple challenges to their well-being (Bowen et al. 2019, Daniel 2020, Fielding-Singh 2021). Such processes also potentially have long-term effects for diet quality and diet-related health. For example, the strategies that economically constrained parents use to minimize the costs associated with food waste may enduringly shape their children's tastes for different kinds of foods (Daniel 2016).

Moreover, recent sociological studies provide powerful evidence that how people go about getting something to eat for themselves and their families is shaped by identities at the intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, and class. Such intersectional identities have implications for a variety of resources that provide the context for how people shop for, prepare, and consume food; these include not only employment and income but also housing status, time, transportation, social networks, and social capital (Bowen et al. 2019, Ewoodzie 2021, Fielding-Singh 2021, Kolb 2021). As well, people make decisions about where they shop and what they purchase based on their perceptions of the quality and variety of food and the accessibility of culturally specific foods, as well as with attention to the availability and timing of food assistance programs (Ewoodzie 2021, MacNell et al. 2017).

These studies also offer important insights about how decision making about food purchases and consumption within families is both deeply relational and shaped by intersectional inequalities. For example, mothers across sociodemographic groups use food as a way to express love and care for their children; their options for doing this, however, are "structured by their social location and resources" (Fielding-Singh 2021, p. 101; see also Perry & Calarco 2017). As a consequence, expectations about mothers' food work—including the multiple ways that mothers are held individually responsible for children's health (Fielding-Singh 2021)—demonstrably "privilege some women while restricting, shaming, or marginalizing others," especially low-income women and women of color (Elliott & Bowen 2018, p. 500; see also Brenton 2017, Cairns et al. 2013, Wright et al. 2015). Though long-standing, these dynamics have been heightened by recent attention to how the products of the industrial food system pose risks to children's health (Elliott & Bowen 2018, MacKendrick & Pristavec 2019).

At the same time, these studies call attention to the importance of understanding the meanings of food, including how specific foods may be valued even if, from the perspective of nutrition experts, they are unhealthy. Concordant with studies that have highlighted how notions of healthy food not only are subject to change over time but are often politicized expressions of dominant White middle-class norms (Beagan & Chapman 2012, Biltekoff 2013, Haydu 2021), these analyses highlight the importance of honoring a diversity of perspectives on the meanings and value of good food (Bowen et al. 2019).

Social Meanings of Food

Drawing on the foundational work of Bourdieu (1984) on the social construction of taste, sociologists have explored how taste for specific kinds of foods "reflects the ability of dominant groups to legitimate their tastes as superior" (Johnston & Baumann 2015, p. 32). Importantly, sociologists have shown that this form of cultural capital intersects with other forms of power, including ethnic and racial inequalities (Oleschuk 2017). For example, even as "omnivorousness"—that is, an ostensible openness to and interest in food that is perceived as exotic and authentic—has become a norm among foodies, foodie culture assumes North American and European cuisine as the culinary canon, thereby creating and maintaining status-based exclusions associated with race and ethnicity (Johnston & Baumann 2015, p. 140). Moreover, while the focus of foodie discourse on exoticism and authenticity has the potential for generating cross-cultural understandings, it also can lead to cultural appropriation, the erasure of the knowledge and creative expression of immigrants, the oversimplification of the history and meaning of ethnic foods, and the neocolonial othering of people of color (Oleschuk 2017).

A related literature explores the meanings of food as part of "the collective identities of communities, diasporas, and nations" (Jordan 2015, p. 36). Such collective identities may be supported by the creation of national and regional cuisines (Ferguson 2004), through cookbooks (Appadurai 1988), vernacular food traditions (Bell & Neill 2014), and the efforts of nation-states to protect (and capitalize upon) cultural traditions linked to specific places where food and drink are produced (Bowen 2015, DeSoucey 2016). The concept of "gastronationalism" highlights how food is taken up in projects of national identity, often in response to "the anomie and placelessness produced by globalization and industrial agribusiness" (DeSoucey 2016, pp. 81, 83–84). One consequence of gastronationalism is that critiques of a nation's foods (or food related practices) may be experienced as "assaults" on its heritage and culture, thereby engendering a political response (DeSoucey 2010, p. 433).

The cultivation, preparation, and consumption of food also can be part of creating and maintaining "boundaries of belonging" that shape inclusion and exclusion within nation-states (Johnston & Baumann 2015, p. 31; Ranta 2015; Raviv 2005). In the US context, foods associated with Black culture "are frequently denounced as unhealthy, simple, or backward, rather than as symbols of resilience, creativity and sustenance" and, indeed, as a foundation of American cuisine (Bowen et al. 2019, p. 8; see also Twitty 2017, Williams-Forson 2006). There is a decades long history of immigrants' foods being derided, by nativist politicians and public health campaigns alike, for being tainted, unclean, and unhealthy (Minkoff-Zern & Carney 2015)—sometimes even as dominant groups appropriate the foodways of their immigrant neighbors (Pilcher 2008). For immigrants and refugees, learning to cook and eat an American diet has been a mechanism of assimilation, even as public health research has demonstrated that the standard American diet is often less healthy than the dietary preferences and norms held by immigrants when they first arrive in the United States (Ayala et al. 2008, Minkoff-Zern & Carney 2015, Mycek et al. 2020, Van Hook et al. 2018). At the same time, the cultivation, preparation, and sharing of food may provide immigrants with a powerful means of celebrating their connections to and expressing longing for the cultures, places, and people of their countries of origin (Cho 2021, Martínez 2016, Plaza 2014).

While research on food production has long attended to its implications for the material world, exciting new studies across sociological subfields are exploring how the meanings of food come to matter. For example, cultural sociologists have examined how collective memory shapes what is grown in gardens and farms across the globe, with consequences for plant genetics and biodiversity, cultural continuity, and the structure of the food system itself (Jordan 2015). Similarly, research demonstrates that insofar as culturally specific hierarchies of taste are imposed on the cuisines of immigrant groups, they have material consequences for "ethnic restaurateurs" (Ray 2016). Urban sociologists have explored the relationships between food and gentrification, describing how developers leverage food—with its intimate connections to history, culture, and place—to bring an "ambiance of authenticity" to their neighborhood (re)branding strategies (Zukin 1995, p. 51;

see also Alkon et al. 2020). Such strategies may have detrimental impacts on local food access, as urban growth coalitions favor food enterprises seen as desirable from the perspective of development while undermining local purveyors—e.g., grocery stores, bodegas, or butchers—serving longtime neighborhood residents (Fiore & Plate 2021, Hall 2020). Relatedly, scholars of science, technology, and medicine have described how the materiality and meanings of food shape our bodies, even at the level of gene expression, with profound implications for individual and population health across generations (Hatch 2016, Landecker 2011). In all of these ways, the meanings of food are implicated in processes that create and sustain inequalities. As well, the meanings of food, justice, and sovereignty are among the foci of contemporary food activism and scholarship.

CHALLENGING INEQUALITIES: FOOD JUSTICE AND FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

Food and drink have long been foci of projects of social reform. Historically, consumer-focused food movements have raised concerns about the safety, nutritional health, and quality of food (Haydu 2021). Sociological analyses have described how these problems are iteratively produced by a capitalist food system that depends on processes of commodification, delocalization, and technological innovation; these, in turn, create ongoing crises in trust, pervasive inequalities, and tremendous waste (Barnard 2016, Carolan 2011, Haydu 2021). It is in this context that (typically White and middle-class) reformers have proposed health foods, natural foods, organics, and local markets as promising alternatives (Allen 2004, Haedicke 2016, Miller 2017; cf. Barnard 2016). Racialized exploitation persists in organic agriculture, however (Alkon 2013, Gray 2013), and the market-focused initiatives of the alternative food movement have yet to successfully challenge "the power of the industrial food system to harm bodies, senses of identity, and everyday lives" (Alkon & Guthman 2017, p. 3). As described below, contemporary food justice and food sovereignty activists advocate for strategies of mobilization that acknowledge and confront intersectional systemic oppressions "in institutional and every day ways" (Reese & Garth 2020, p. 8), address the root causes of inequities (Sbicca 2018), create new approaches to land and labor relations that "place them outside the speculative market and the rationale of extraction" (Cadieux & Slocum 2015, p. 13), and support collective agency, community resilience, and resistance (White 2018).

Food Justice

Food justice, a term coined by activists and then developed by scholars, is an approach to identifying and addressing systems of inequality and oppression associated with the production, distribution, and consumption of food (Alkon & Norgaard 2009). There are divergent imaginaries of justice in food justice organizations, both across national contexts (Coulson & Milbourne 2021) and within the United States (Carolan 2018, Garth 2020), and academic conceptualizations have expanded over time (Sbicca 2018). Central to this approach, however, are (*a*) an insistence that all people have a right to healthy, affordable, culturally appropriate food and (*b*) an analysis of how intersecting systems of domination and oppression—including capitalism, racism, colonialism, and patriarchy—create inequities within and beyond the food system (Alkon & Norgaard 2009, Cadieux & Slocum 2015). Consequently, scholarship on food justice often examines how "race, ethnicity, class, gender, and the state intersect with corporate power to produce an array of inequities" including in regard to food access, the experiences of food system workers, relationships to the land, and respect for food cultures (Sbicca 2018, p. 11; Reese & Garth 2020).

Sociologists trace the emergence of food justice frameworks to the Black agricultural cooperatives of the rural South (White 2018), the Black Panther Party's survival programs (Hassberg 2020), and the contemporary environmental justice movement (Alkon & Norgaard 2009). From both Black farmers' cooperatives and the Black Panther Party's food distribution programs, food justice activists take the insight that "providing food is not the revolution, but a vehicle through which revolution is made possible" (Hassberg 2020, pp. 97–98). Indeed, recent historical analyses highlight how Black farmers in the South "used the land individually and collectively to challenge white supremacy and political and economic exploitation" and provided "crucial support for activists working for change in other arenas, such as voting rights and the fight against segregation" (White 2018, p. 142; see also DeBerry et al. 2020). Extending the framework of the environmental justice movement, food justice activists contend that just as individuals and groups who are marginalized by race, ethnicity, nationality, class, and gender are more likely to experience harmful environmental exposures, they are disadvantaged across every aspect of the food system (Sbicca 2018). In fact, sociologists have demonstrated that structurally disadvantaged and minoritized communities are less likely to have access to a variety of amenities, including healthy and desired foods (Anguelovski 2014, Carter 2016, Satcher 2022), a situation that activists and scholars often refer to as "food apartheid" (Brones 2018).

Many food justice organizations have established community farms and gardens as part of "a multifaceted approach to addressing systemic or structural inequalities. . .[and] harnessing political forces to confront and change failing social and political institutions more broadly" (Kato et al. 2014, p. 1837). Although growing food does not necessarily advance social justice, community farms and gardens may become sites of activism regarding not only food inequities but also other urgent issues facing structurally disadvantaged communities (Cadieux & Slocum 2015). For example, insofar as the capacity to grow healthy food requires secure access to land and clean soil and water, establishing community farms and gardens may lead participants to organize and to initiate community land trusts, redress environmental contamination, and/or challenge the proposed siting of polluting facilities in their neighborhood (Shostak 2022). Further, while there is evidence that "greening" urban neighborhoods can contribute to gentrification, recent scholarship highlights examples of "radical allyship," in which food justice activists have worked together with long-term community residents to prevent their displacement (Alkon et al. 2019, p. 798).

Indeed, the ongoing and emerging alignments between food justice activism and other kinds of political organizing—and their successes and failures—are important foci for sociological research. These include efforts to address the relationships between food, carcerality, and resistance (Hatch 2019, Reese & Sbicca 2022); to align food justice with labor and immigrant rights (Sbicca et al. 2020); to articulate the relationships between land, food, and justice for both rural and urban communities (Shostak 2021, White 2018); and to consider how climate change might recapitulate historical inequities (Hoffman et al. 2020, Li & Yuan 2022).

Food Sovereignty

The term "food sovereignty" was first defined by La Vía Campesina, "an international group of peasants and small-scale farmers who sought to articulate a common response to neoliberalism and the dominant market economy and to defend their rights to land and seeds" (Hoover & Mihesuah 2019, p. 7). In 2007, at the Forum for Food Sovereignty in Mali, the declaration of Nyéléni proclaimed food sovereignty to be "the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems" (La Vía Campesina 2009). As scholars have noted, this definition of food sovereignty highlights both the goals toward which it is striving (e.g., healthy and culturally appropriate food, produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, often by small-scale farmers) and those which it is working against (e.g., states, markets, and corporations having the power to determine the form and function of an increasingly globalized and industrialized food system) (Kerr et al. 2019). As a political agenda, food sovereignty makes connections between food access, land rights, sustainable peasant agriculture, science and technology, and the empowerment of small-scale farmers and communities (Bacon 2015, Boone & Taylor 2016).

Food sovereignty activists work in diverse locations across the globe, and their efforts are shaped by local and regional challenges (Alonso-Fradejas et al. 2015, Brent et al. 2015). Broadly, they aim to challenge neoliberal economic development and industrial agriculture, while advocating for democratically controlled and regional food systems that will support the food production practices of agrarian peoples (Alkon & Mares 2012, Hoover & Mihesuah 2019). Relatedly, at the center of these movements is an insistence on the importance of reclaiming land, seeds, and local knowledges and practices of growing food, all of which have been disrupted by practices and policies of the current industrialized food system (Hoover & Mihesuah 2019, Leguizamón 2020).

In North America, the concept of food sovereignty has been taken up and elaborated, especially by Indigenous activists and scholars who have emphasized the role of fishing, hunting, and gathering—as well as agriculture—in upholding "sacred responsibilities to nurture relationships with our land, culture, spirituality, and future generations" (Hoover & Mihesuah 2019, p. 12; see also Martens et al. 2016). While there is variation in how Indigenous food activists and scholars define sovereignty (Hoover 2019), their activism "connects the health of food with the health of the land and identifies a history of social injustice as having radically reduced indigenous food sovereignty in colonized nations" (Rudolph & McLachlan 2013, p. 1081). The Indigenous food sovereignty movement seeks to redress settler colonialist violence that has damaged Indigenous food systems by alienating peoples from their lands (and pushing Native peoples to marginal territories), disrupting hunting and fishing cultures (and the social relations and cultural practices embedded within them), allowing Native lands to be contaminated with environmental pollutants; undermining Native epistemologies in which the land, plants, and animals that provide food are seen as sacred relations; using food as a mechanism of forced assimilation; and distributing highly processed foods to food-insecure households—e.g., through the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations—with a myriad of negative health and social consequences (Hoover & Mihesuah 2019, Norgaard 2019).

Indigenous food sovereignty activists and scholars have raised critical questions, as well, about how climate change will disrupt Native food systems, exacerbating loss of access to traditional foods, culture, and social relationships, including with nonhuman relatives (Whyte 2019). The industrial food system is both a major contributor to anthropogenic climate change and profoundly vulnerable to its impacts, making it an urgent focus of research on transition processes (Letourneau & Davidson 2022). Indeed, climate change is already affecting diverse forms of food production across the United States, in ways that are perceptible to both commercial and subsistence producers (Colby 2020, Teigen De Master et al. 2019). Food sovereignty scholars remind us that future research must attend to how differences in social roles, locations, and culture shape experiences of climate change and collective capacities to respond to them (Ford & Norgaard 2020, Whyte 2019).

CONCLUSIONS

Over the past two decades, sociologists working in a variety of subfields have examined how "food is shaped by and has consequences for multiple aspects of social, economic, and political life" (Alkon et al. 2020, p. 14). This research powerfully demonstrates that the production, consumption, materiality, and meanings of food are deeply intertwined with structures and processes that produce and maintain inequality. Moreover, sociological research on food and food systems makes clear that these inequalities operate across scales, from the global industrial food system to the effects of food insecurity within the human body, with profound consequences for individual and population health. As important as this research is to sociology, it also has much to offer contemporary policy initiatives that aim to address inequities in agriculture, nutrition, and health.

Both as a consequence of sustained activism focused on racial justice and in response to the exigencies of the COVID-19 pandemic, the past few years have brought dramatic changes to the policies that long have shaped the food system in the United States (Poppendieck 1986, 1998). Like the food system itself, these policy changes span scales and locations, sometimes even within a single piece of legislation. For example, the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARP) promised $4 billion for debt forgiveness for Black and other socially disadvantaged farmers meant to redress decades of institutionalized racism, discrimination, and subsequent land loss.[4] The ARP also extended funding for emergency modifications made to the USDA's nutrition assistance programs earlier in the pandemic; these included extensions of the 15% increase in benefits for those eligible for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program; the Pandemic Electronic Benefits Program, which provides food dollars to families to buy groceries to make up for meals missed when schools are closed; and supplemental nutritional programs that serve women, infants, and children and low-income elderly individuals (USDA 2021). With the announcement of new national strategy to address "hunger, diet-related diseases, and health disparities"[5] (US Dep. Health Hum. Serv. 2022), increasing state-level advocacy around the idea that "food is medicine" (Downer et al. 2020), and the inclusion of "adequate nutrition" as an explicit focus of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act's "community benefits" requirements for nonprofit hospitals (IRS 2022), it seems certain that food, nutrition, and health will continue to be foci of national, state, and local policies.

As demonstrated by this review, sociological research is essential to understanding the contexts and consequences of these policies and the programs they create. For example, sociologists have shown that without learning from people how they actually feed themselves and their families, interventions that are meant to support food access may make it more difficult for people to transition out of poverty (Ewoodzie 2021) and exacerbate intersectional inequalities (Bowen et al. 2019). Relatedly, sociologists have demonstrated that food access should be conceptualized not solely as a function of household economic resources but also as shaped by what "good food" means to individuals and families, perceptions and experiences of local food environments, and the central role of food as part of valued cultures and identities (Cho 2021, Bowen et al. 2019, Hoover & Mihesuah 2019, Mayorga et al. 2022, Reese & Garth 2020). Lastly, a robust sociological literature provides evidence that female caregivers disproportionately bear responsibility for feeding families, with potentially significant consequences for their physical and mental health (Elliott & Bowen 2018, Fielding-Singh 2021, Martin & Lippert 2012). As such, a sociologically informed accounting of the effects of recent policy changes must consider what factors make it more or less possible for individuals and families to leverage new resources as they become available; how the intended beneficiaries of new policies and programs perceive and experience them in practice, especially in regard to valued food cultures and identities; what meanings people attribute to food assistance programs and the food they provide (and how this affects uptake); how the histories of food environments (at different scales) shape new practices of food provisioning; and how intersectional inequalities may continue to shape experiences of food insecurity even as policies change over time, and with what consequences, especially for female caregivers

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[4] The debt forgiveness is limited to Farm Service Agency Direct and Guaranteed Farm Loans and Farm Storage Facility Loans. Eligible farmers are those who identify as Black/African American, American Indian, Alaskan Native, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, or Pacific Islander. This definition of "socially disadvantaged" farmers is from the Food, Agriculture, Conservation, and Trade Act of 1990. The text is available at **https://www.farmers.gov/loans/american-rescue-plan**.

[5] The White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health, in September 2022, was the first such convening in over 50 years.

(Bowen et al. 2021b, Elliott et al. 2021, Shannon et al. 2021). At the same time, the emergence of new ways of framing the relationships between food and health (e.g., "food is medicine") and the increasing integration of food and nutrition programs, such as "produce prescriptions" and "farmacies," into healthcare delivery systems (Downer et al. 2020) offer intriguing sites for sociological analyses.

While new programs to support food access have been implemented across the country, legal challenges from White farmers (supported by conservative legal foundations) have impeded the ARP's debt relief program for Black and other socially disadvantaged farmers. The delays introduced by these lawsuits may lead to further foreclosures and land loss, exacerbating the very inequities that the law aims to redress (Rappeport 2022). These lawsuits highlight the importance of sustained sociological attention to advocacy and system change efforts to increase equity in agriculture, as well as in food access. Sociologists may contribute to these efforts by continuing to excavate the histories of racism, capitalism, and colonialism that undergird the contemporary food system; making visible the structural vulnerabilities and exploitation of those who grow, harvest, and process food, especially in the context of climate change; exploring the emergence of alternatives to commodified and extractive relationships to the land; examining the consequences of food justice and food sovereignty strategies that seek to advance collective agency and community resilience; assessing the outcomes of policies meant to redress longstanding intersectional inequities in land ownership; and attending to the trajectories of coalitions that bring together and build political power across social movements (Cadieux & Slocum 2015, White 2018, Sbicca et al. 2020).

A society's food system is a fundamental aspect of its organization and its capacity to respond to large-scale changes and challenges (Whyte 2019). At this moment in which scholars, activists, and policy makers seek to understand and address urgent challenges at the intersections of racial justice, health equity, and climate change, sociological research on food and inequality has critical contributions to make both within and beyond the discipline.

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