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Power Relations and Empowerment in the Agri-Food System

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1. Introduction

Production, trade, processing, and distribution of food have long been influenced by different degrees of power relationships that are enacted at different spatial and temporal scales, from the global to the local. However, while both politics and the corporate sector have been critiqued for consolidating control over the food system in recent decades (Lang & Heasman, 2015, p. 20), a growing number of initiatives and organizations demonstrate what may be called "resistance" (Kneafsey et al. 2021, p. 12, 16): Urban gardening, community-supported agriculture, food sharing, and many other sustainability efforts aim to provide an alternative to the traditional agri-food system. Such projects often establish innovative connections between rural producers and urban consumers, generating visibility in neighborhoods and on social media. Current scientific discourse concerning the transition to sustainable agri-food systems mirrors the mounting societal interest in local food initiatives, alternative food networks, and shifts in consumer behavior.

Yet, these initiatives often remain in spatial and socio-economic niches, or in so called green bubbles, without generating a greater societal impact. To date, the "bigger picture," namely the structural challenges and power relations within the current conventional agri-food system does not seem fully understood. Critical studies on power oligarchies and monopolization in global trade relations are underrepresented in agri-food research. Consequently, our knowledge of powerful agri-food system actors, such as agro-investors, transnational agribusiness corporations, and lobby groups, remains limited. Similarly, there is a lack of research on the historical or postcolonial and political causes of power imbalances in the global agri-food system and on perspectives of empowerment.

This special issue aims to address this gap. The initiative for this edition goes back to a conference organized in March 2023 at the University of Hohenheim by the working group "Agri-Food Geographies" of the German Society of Geography (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Geographie). The conference provided an opportunity for several guest speakers from the Global South to share their insights on current research regarding power struggles in globally and locally connected

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value chains. It also allowed scientists and students to exchange ideas on conceptual approaches, policy analysis, and methods for studying power relations in agri-food systems. This special issue is based on several of the conference presentations and aims to continue the inspiring debate in order to foster research on power structures and empowerment in agri-food studies. We selected conceptual papers that help us analyze the making of unequal power relations and resistances in the agri-food system, as well as case studies from different continents that focus on power relations within specific value chains, such as coffee or meat.

2. Power Structures in the Agri-Food System

Why look at *food systems*? Potentially, they constitute one of the most comprehensive perspectives to unpack the what, when, where, who, and how of "food"—including the question of power. The system perspective encompasses the entire spectrum of processes and activities, extending from cultivation and production through processing, marketing, and consumption to the disposal of waste arising from agriculture, forestry, and fisheries. It is grounded in a socio-ecological conception of the system, shaped by both biophysical and social determinants and interconnected through feedback mechanisms (e.g., Ingram, 2011). Adopting a systems approach enables the analysis of complex spatial interrelations that involve a wide range of stakeholder groups and framework conditions. Moreover, it captures the interdependencies between consumers and producers, the reciprocal relationships between society and the environment, as well as the interactions across multiple spatial scales (Tendall et al., 2015).

What are the reasons for unequal power structures in the agri-food system? How have certain actors achieved powerful positions that allow them to influence trade dynamics? Why are certain social groups trapped in cycles of continuous vulnerability and powerlessness? While these questions have received increasing attention over recent years, significant research gaps remain. In the following, we provide a brief sketch of the key ideas of some approaches that provide important insights into power geometries in the global agri-food system, without providing an exhaustive overview.

The power relationships between countries of the Global North and the Global South—or the Minority World and Majority World, as Kneafsey et al. (2021) choose to term them—can be regarded as possibly the most influential in shaping *geographies of food*. Taking a macro perspective, this relationship is also considered in the *food regime theory* (FRT), which builds on a number of intellectual traditions including regulation theory and world systems theory. It was introduced in a seminal article by Philip McMichael and Harriet Friedmann published in *Sociologia Ruralis* in 1989. The two authors proposed analyzing the history of agriculture and world economy in terms of food regimes. Food regimes are phases of relative stability with specific patterns of agricultural production and consumption, followed by periods of crisis that lead to the transition to a next food regime. Food regimes are characterized by specific global agri-food power constellations dominated by hegemonic nations and actors. Although these and other authors have revised and debated the terminology and time frames of the different food regimes over time, the core aim of using food regimes to illuminate global power relations in the agri-food sector has remained constant (Jakobsen, 2021; Maye, 2025 in this issue).

Friedmann and McMichael focused on distribution issues, the relationships between state systems and key actors, and the specific patterns of agriculture and trade. In Food Regime I (diasporic-colonial, 1870–1914), Great Britain, the dominant colonial power, set the rules and currency of the global market. In contrast, Food Regime II (mercantile-industrial, 1947–1973) was shaped by the United States' hegemony (Friedmann, 2005).

Philip McMichael (2005) conceptualized the economic dynamics following the 1972–1975 world food crisis as the third corporate food regime. This regime is driven by neoliberal globalization and involves the consolidation of power over food production, distribution, and consumption by transnational agribusinesses and retail corporations, which often subjugate states and producers to market logics and global supply chains. Harriet Friedmann (2005) expanded on this perspective by highlighting the contradictions of a corporate-environmental food regime that become apparent through *green capitalism*, the selective appropriation of demands of environmental movements by agri-food corporations that increasingly invest in the organic market. This resulted in a division of the global market, with poorer classes relying on *food*

from nowhere, food from mass production, and privileged consumers who have access to high-quality, regional, and organically sourced *food from somewhere* (Campbell, 2009). Although the shape of a third food regime is still widely debated to this day (Jakobsen, 2021), other authors even argue for the development of a fourth regime, in which the power roles of certain Global South countries are reevaluated. For example, China's large-scale land acquisitions in Africa for agricultural purposes are met with resistance from food sovereignty movements worldwide (Kneafsey et al., 2021).

To better understand the historical development of power relations, various authors adopt a *postcolonial perspective* to show how colonial power relations have shaped agri-food systems historically and continue to shape them:

> Coloniality constructed its own world, one which, to date, is responsible for the way in which the Western world is fed, and defines its food institutions and their relationships: grower, distributor, and processor (of commodities, including labor), and finally trader and consumer. (Ujuaje & Chang, 2020, p. 18)

Hector Alimonda (2011) coined the term *coloniality of nature* to describe how colonial power structures are embedded in Latin American agri-food landscapes. One example is the monoculture of plantains in Caribbean countries where the expansion of the plantation economies has led to the marginalization of small-scale agriculture and loss of food sovereignty. According to Alimonda, the expansion of colonialism and capitalism resulted not only in the conquest of territories and natural resources but also in the hegemonic appropriation of indigenous and local knowledge about nature and biodiversity. To this day, pharmaceutical corporations have interests in gaining knowledge about the medical properties of specific Amazonian plants. The struggles against the commodification and patenting of seed varieties show that colonial-rooted power imbalances persist (Gutiérrez Escobar, 2015). Hoinle and Brückner (2023) build on Alimonda's perspective with their term *coloniality of food*, emphasizing the intersectional power relations in food production and preparation expressed through unequal patterns of care work distribution and culinary knowledge appropriation.

José Luis Vivero-Pol aligns with this critical perspective, focusing on the notion of *food as commodity* in contrast to *food as a commons* (2017). He distinguishes between six dimensions of food, namely food as a renewable resource, as essential for human life, a human right, a cultural determinant, a public good and a tradable good. He emphasizes that food comprises all of these dimensions—however, with the capitalist expansion in the global market, the notion of food as commodity has become more powerful. As a result, people are reduced to the role of consumers who obtain the right to access food solely through their purchasing power. Conversely, the concept of food as a commons signifies that people can engage in the role of citizens within the food system, thereby acquiring decision-making power to determine the future trajectory of their local food system. The notion of *food citizenship* or *food democracy* was adopted by the Food Policy Council movement, which sought to democratize local food policies (Birnbaum & Lütke, 2023).

Over the past three decades, concepts such as the *global commodity chain* (GCC; Gereffi & Korzeniewicz, 1994), the *global value chain* (GVC; Gereffi et al., 2005), and the *global production network* (GPN; Henderson et al., 2002) have contributed to the analysis of power relations in global trade, offering many studies on agricultural and other food products (e.g., Follmann et al., 2024, focusing on sustainability and resilience in agri-food chains). From a governance perspective, these concepts examine power relationships between lead firms and their suppliers. Dominant power configurations can be related to market access, firms' capabilities or capacities, product/process complexity, or the codifiability of knowledge. Besides, both GVC and GPN approaches consider the influence of specific global, national, and regional contexts, shaped by regional assets as well as political and institutional frameworks. Within the GPN framework (e.g., Coe et al., 2004), the analysis of power is articulated through three dimensions: corporate power, exercised by lead firms and transnational corporations in structuring production and distribution; institutional power, embedded in the regulatory, policy, and governance frameworks of states and international organizations; and collective power, mobilized by workers, communities, and civil society groups. Considering these dimensions alongside spatial and locational factors helps to explain how and why specific value chain segments emerge, who is able to participate in or is excluded from value capture, and how particular dependencies and inequalities—especially in the Global South—are produced

and sustained (for Indian pepper sold in Germany, see, e.g., Hassler & Franz, 2013). In this context, a number of studies on agri-food chains/networks have examined the role of social and environmental standards and certification schemes (e.g., organic, fair trade, and Global GAP) as a means to govern these chains. Questions revolve around who designs and sets these standards (frequently actors in the Global North, including the public and private sector) and whether and how smallholder farmers in the Global South benefit from according upgrading opportunities or, conversely, may be excluded from chain integration due to a lack of capabilities to meet the standards' requirements (e.g., Ouma, 2010; Bernzen & Braun, 2014; Krauss & Krishnan, 2022).

3. Empowerment and Transformation

In light of the unequal power relations in the agri-food system, several approaches aim to conceptualize empowerment perspectives for underprivileged social groups. The term *empowerment* originated from feminist movements in the Global South during the 1980s (León, 2002). Although the term empowerment today is often used loosely in different areas, its deeper meaning is based on its root concept: power. Lukes (1974) distinguishes four forms of power: *power over*, *power from within*, *power with* and *power to*. Power over refers to traditional views of power as absolute and hegemonic. In contrast, power with and power to highlight the idea that power can be used collectively and constructively to achieve certain goals. This emancipatory view of power is central to several agri-food research concepts that aim to empower disadvantaged social groups.

One relevant concept is *food sovereignty* which was developed by the La Via Campesina, a social movement that unifies small-scale farmer organizations in the Global South (Desmarais, 2007). The Nyéléni Forum of 2007 defined food sovereignty as the right of people to have access to culturally appropriate food and to decide on their own food and agriculture systems (Jarosz, 2014). According to this vision, food is an integral part of local cultures, and regional networks can close the gap between food production and consumption. The goal of food sovereignty is to democratize the food system and empower agricultural producers, especially peasants, to participate in agricultural policies that affect their livelihoods (Martínez-Torres & Rosset 2014, p. 6).

Another relevant concept that addresses power inequalities and empowerment in the agri-food system is *food justice*. The term emerged from struggles against food racism in urban North American contexts (Motta, 2021). Authors such as Ashanté Reese (2019) and Hanna Garth (2020) use an intersectional approach to analyze structural inequalities in the access to fresh and healthy food. The approach sheds light on the various forms of discrimination in urban foodscapes based on gender, class, age, and race that operate on different levels, ranging from the body and household to the discourse and structural levels (Winker & Degele, 2011). Food justice advocates for the right to food regardless of income and emphasizes the agency and capabilities of diverse social groups (Reese, 2019).

4. From Colonial Trauma to Culinary Justice—Conceptual and Empirical Contributions to Addressing Power Relations in Agri-Food Systems

This special issue provides insights into recent research on power dynamics and empowerment within the agri-food system. Readers are invited on a journey to different case study sites in both the Global South and the Global North, and to learn about tools for analyzing power inequalities and transformative approaches.

Damian Maye begins with a conceptual paper that addresses the central questions of what food means at the societal level. He argues that food is ontologically multiple, its meaning and governance shaped by competing value frameworks and power relations. The author builds on the typology of *food as a commodity*, *a human right*, and *a common good*, and then extends it to incorporate a fourth, *more-than-human*, view.

Drawing on food regime theory, political economy, and Polanyi's concept of the *double movement*, Maye examines how food systems reflect the shifting geographies of power, from colonial empires to today's corporate-dominated agri-food system characterized by extreme concentration and an "hourglass" structure. Counter-movements, such as alternative food networks, food sovereignty initiatives, and rights-based approaches, challenge this power structure and the reduction of food to its significance as a commodity, instead framing food as a human right or common good. Yet, neoliberalism twists such critiques into market logics. This is evident in the case of alternative

proteins, agri-food digitalization, and regenerative agriculture and illustrates the dialectical interplay between marketization and resistance.

Yet, as the author argues, understanding food-related power requires considering not only social actors but also the more-than-human world. He calls for an expanded analysis that takes into account the land-food-climate nexus, where food politics intersects with planetary boundaries, multispecies relations, and metabolic politics. In this context, new forms of colonialism, dispossession, and climate capitalism necessitate more-than-human ethics, Indigenous worldviews, and planetary social thought.

A second conceptual contribution in this special issue is offered by Meike Brückner and Birgit Hoinle. They introduce the notion of culinary justice as a means of broadening existing debates on food justice, which have been prominent in Anglophone scholarship in urban geography and agri-food studies. Recognizing that everyday culinary practices are deeply embedded in relations of power and inequality, the authors conceptualize culinary justice as linking food practices to questions of justice. They show how such issues become visible in the gendered and racialized division of care work associated with preparing, cooking, serving, eating, and sharing food. At the same time, their framework draws attention to the symbolic and cultural dimensions of food—such as the pleasures of eating, the creativity of cooking, and the meanings attached to culinary knowledge. Brückner and Hoinle's central argument is that culinary practices are crucial to questions of justice, as they illuminate socio-cultural, ecological, political, and historical dimensions of food (in)equalities in ways that more conventional food justice approaches often overlook.

The authors propose four central conceptual dimensions of culinary justice: food knowledge, care work, commensality, and spatial settings. Drawing primarily on a literature review and some empirical examples, they illustrate how the concept can be applied in practical research by analyzing how these four dimensions become apparent in four different culinary contexts: private households, commercial restaurants, public catering, and community kitchens. They close by inviting further empirical applications of the concept, for instance, on farms or (community) gardens or the mostly invisible work of kitchen staff in commercial contexts. Conceptually, they suggest that linking culinary justice to climate justice literatures could address current and future environmental challenges.

Coffee is one of the most popular drinks in Europe. An increasing number of baristas, hyped as coffee-making experts, are defining a new trend in coffee culture, experimenting with different preparation techniques and properties. They gain discursive power in defining the quality and value of certain coffee styles. However, these practices obscure the labor and knowledge necessary for the production of coffee beans. The article by Cano-Gonzalez & Quiñones-Ruiz sheds light on the power dynamics throughout the global coffee value chain by focusing on epistemological inequalities. The authors question the ways in which quality and value are defined from a Western perspective through certification mechanisms and labels. From a decolonial viewpoint, they argue that value chains are not merely means of exchanging goods but a contested political arena of power struggles. Adopting an analytical focus on place-based and situated ontologies, they analyze through a literature review how Indigenous knowledge is addressed in current research on coffee value chains. Their study is based on the concept of *coloniality of power* developed by Anibal Quijano (2007). The Peruvian sociologist and humanist thinker demonstrated how colonial legacies continue to shape today's global systems of power and value. The authors adopt his concept, focusing on three dimensions: the *coloniality of labor*, the *coloniality of knowledge*, and the *coloniality of being*. In their analysis, Cano-Gonzalez & Quiñones-Ruiz demonstrate how these dimensions manifest in contemporary coffee value chains and identify Indigenous knowledge as a response to the systemic crises and effects of coloniality, highlighting the agency, cultural narratives, and agroecological management strategies employed by diverse farming communities around the world. In doing so, the authors address a significant research gap, as decolonial approaches have rarely been applied to studies of coffee value chains. They conclude that appreciating Indigenous knowledge as relevant for coffee production is not enough. What is needed is a redefinition of Westernized parameters of sustainability and value.

Turning from coffee to meat, Elena Lazos examines in her article the unequal power relations and socio-ecological vulnerabilities that characterize cattle raising in southern Veracruz, Mexico, in the context of the expansion of transnational beef corporations. Since the 1990s, cattle production in Mexico has shifted

from extensive free-range grazing to feedlot-based systems, a change driven by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and neoliberal restructuring. Transnational corporations and large-scale feedlots exert control over small- and medium-scale cattle raisers by dictating purchase prices and production conditions. This has resulted in economic dependence, limited investment capacity, and environmental degradation. Drawing on political economy and Foucault's concept of the *microphysics of power,* Lazos develops the notion of *meat power* to describe the multiscalar network of actors—including merchants, feedlot enterprises, associations, and political authorities—that structure the region's beef industry and reinforce inequalities.

Based on extensive fieldwork in the Los Tuxtlas region since 2019, including interviews, focus groups, and participatory workshops, the study documents the compounded vulnerabilities faced by small- and medium-scale cattle raisers: declining pasture productivity, climate variability, disease, and volatile markets. Despite attempts to implement sustainable alternatives such as silvopastoral systems, these efforts are constrained by entrenched power networks that privilege large-scale feedlot operations and prioritize meat exports. The analysis demonstrates that silvopastoral systems offer ecological and social benefits, including biodiversity recovery and water security, yet remain politically and economically marginalized.

The article concludes that meat power is evident not only in the commodification and accelerated fattening of cattle but also in the dispossession of land, forest resources, and decision-making autonomy from smallholders. The findings underscore the urgent need for policies that promote agroecological practices, reduce dependence on feedlot-based models, and democratize food governance. Addressing the unequal dynamics of meat production ultimately requires challenging transnational corporate dominance and fostering food and environmental justice through participatory and sustainable alternatives.

Chile is a very particular case for studying power relations in the agri-food system. Following the 1973 military coup led by dictator Augusto Pinochet, the Andean country became the first laboratory for neoliberal policies experimentation. These were later implemented in many countries of the Global South through the structural adjustment programs, which involved the opening and deregulation of agricultural markets and monocultural production for export. The effects of neoliberal agricultural policies are particularly visible in the case of Chile through land concentration and agricultural intensification. However, Chile is also known for its strong agroecological and indigenous social movements. In 2019, Chile entered the global news due to the massive social protests against increasing living costs and social inequalities resulting from two decades of dictatorship (1973–1990) and neoliberal economic policy measures. The broad popular uprising resulted in the process for a new constitution in which several representatives of social movements took part. Food and the agricultural system were one of the key topics in the draft for a new constitution. The article by Panez Pinto et al. analyzes the disputes over agricultural policies and the underlying power structures, shedding light on the viewpoints and interests of various actor groups involved in the constitutional process. The authors bring Gramsci's theoretical perspective on hegemony into dialogue with poststructuralist theories in order to analyze the communication strategies applied in the run-up to the plebiscite. The constitution proposed in 2022 contained very progressive constitutional norms, such as the right of nature, yet it was rejected by 62% of the voters. The analysis of the authors provides valuable insights into how right-wing forces succeeded in using communication strategies to create a hegemonic discourse against the constitutional proposal by mobilizing values and identity elements of rural inhabitants.

The final article in this collection takes us to modern-day India. Purchasing a single coconut or bag of peanuts from a simple street vendor by means of a QR code has become an almost ubiquitous phenomenon in Indian cities. In her article "Disrupting Colonial Trauma through the Hyper Consumption of Outside Foods in India? A Digital Food Consumer Citizenship," Merle Müller-Hansen interrogates the complex intersections of food, colonial legacies, and digital technology in contemporary India, asking whether the consumption of socially coded foods can disrupt colonial trauma and what role digital infrastructures play in this process. Drawing on a comprehensive literature review and three periods of participant observation in Hyderabad on everyday food experiences and activities, as well as the spatial and socio-cultural context of people's food consumption, the study illustrates how technologically mediated food practices subtly challenge Eurocentric assumptions of superiority em-

bedded in colonial imaginaries. Müller-Hansen's core argument is that digital food practices in India extend beyond mere acts of consumption; they function as arenas for negotiation, resistance, and culture-making that transcend national and global boundaries. She shows how specific projects, such as community-run kitchens, digital platforms, a feminist podcast, and the nutriAIDE app challenge dominant market narratives and hegemonic food systems. These practices demonstrate the potential of digital infrastructures to foster alternative futures anchored in justice, care, and self-determination, while simultaneously highlighting the influence of India's technologically engaged citizenry and its rapidly expanding tech sector in reshaping global hierarchies.

With this special issue, we invite readers to dive deeper into analyzing global power dynamics in the agri-food system from different conceptual, historical, and regional angles. The contributions provide inspiring insights for understanding and transforming power relations and thinking about empowerment perspectives. Current phenomena such as rising food inequalities in cities in the Global North and the Global South and U.S. trade blockades, illustrate the need for future research to understand and conceptually grasp new power constellations in the agri-food system. Future research could analyze the interlinkages between state and corporate actors and potential strategies that societal actors could use to influence agri-food policies toward more just and sustainable principles.

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