

RESEARCH COMMENTARIES: FOOD SYSTEMS RESEARCH PRIORITIES OVER THE NEXT 5 YEARS

A research agenda for food system transformation through autonomous community-based food projects

Branden Born
University of Washington

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Abstract

The focus of much of the research that examines the food system coming from the planning and policy fields is empirical and reductionist, following a rational technocratic planning epistemology. One critical failing in this approach is a general reliance on the state and its close ties to capital through a global neoliberal economic philosophy that is entirely enmeshed with the food system. This research thus examines methodological approaches to identifying and measuring food deserts, “obesogenic” environments, and the like, and proposes solutions that tinker with the current system, such as the inclusion of grocery stores in food deserts. Such a research approach will not lead to a radical transformation of the food system.

Those who seek a fundamentally different food system based on democratic and ecological principles need to look elsewhere for solutions. Fortunately, examples to study are everywhere once one knows what to look for. Following the theoretical work of Deleuze and Guattari, Virno, Graeber, and Holland, a five-year research design would begin to identify, understand, and determine how to assist and connect examples of community-based programs that collectively represent an exodus from the current food system. Such a program would need to recognize reformist ideas and research agendas while clearly delineating an alternative long-term strategy based in a distinctly oppositional, nonstate, radically democratic approach to building a new food system.

Keywords

anarchist, Deleuze and Guattari, democracy, food system, Marxist, neoliberalism, political theory, radical, research agenda

Branden Born, Associate Professor, Department of Urban Design and Planning, University of Washington; 3949 15th Avenue NE, Room 410; Seattle, Washington 98195 USA; +1-907-786-6541; bborn@uw.edu

The Challenge

I was a student of Jerry Kaufman, a pioneering professor of planning for urban food systems, and I became an early supporter of food systems research in the field of planning. This commentary reflects my own growing discomfort with how food systems and planning research is currently framed and conducted. This discomfort has led me to think about the structural problems of the current food system, the potential represented by the numerous actors operating in opposition to or outside it, and how the failings of the food system are not really limited by the boundaries of the food system and are more aptly defined by the structural problems of capitalism and neoliberal states. I have come to believe that it is time for the research community to move beyond what I call first-wave empiricism and an associated spatial determinism of human behavior, such as measuring food deserts, walkability, and impacts of grocery store location on individual eating habits. There are clearly problems with the food system — most related to equity, power, and poverty — and research needs to move away from ostensibly objective and politically benign quantitative description of these known problems. It needs to focus on how to dramatically transform the system from entrenched unsustainable, exploitative, and unjust patterns to a system that benefits people and the planet. This is not the “research agenda” that most foundations or national governmental funders are talking about. This is a global peoples’ agenda focused on justice and on ending hunger and environmental degradation.

Efforts to build a new food system exist, and they all take leave of the global industrial food system to some extent. This is done through individual and collective acts that conveniently parallel the suggestions of a set of influential political theorists, most notably Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1972, 1980) who provide the concept of “lines of flight,” and Paulo Virno (2006), who terms this flight an “exodus,” from the state and the capitalist framings of our current system. These lines of flight or exodus represent a turning away, a leaving, in this case from the corporate industrial food system. The exodus does not represent groups fighting against this system, or trying to

change or reform it. Rather, it is an explicit act of groups ignoring the system, of refusing to fit into its all-encompassing web, while beginning the work of creating, of becoming a different food system as they flee. Deleuze and Guattari describe this as forming assemblages, which resist constant attempts by the system to recapture the fleeing bodies. The ideas from these related thinkers — flight, noncentralized and nonhierarchical organizing, and networked autonomy — can help shape a new research agenda that will move the field in important and necessary directions.

The Limitation of Epistemology and Reductionism

In general, the focus of research that examines the food system coming from planning and policy fields is empirical and oftentimes reductionist, following a distinctly Western rational technocratic epistemology. This should come as no surprise, as academics and vanguard practitioners for almost 20 years have been calling for these fields to bring their skill sets to bear on issues of food systems. In general this might be a good thing, but without a structural, more nuanced understanding of how the food system is organized and who benefits (and does not) from its organization, such attention will fail to change this broken system. The critical, substantive failing in this approach is a general reliance on the state and its close ties to capital through a global neoliberal economic philosophy that is entirely enmeshed in the current industrial food system. The methodological failing is that such complex social systems do not reduce to nice clean models, so findings can be misleading at best, misguided, or at worst supportive of the very structures that have caused food systems’ inequities. A new research agenda needs to adopt different research approaches and epistemologies.

This rationally based reductionism, which can be necessary basic and descriptive work, quickly becomes what Harvey (1973) would call counter-revolutionary; it stands in the way of fundamental system change. It does so by diverting the productive efforts of researchers into reformist pathways more amenable to state and corporate interests, by creating “diversionary” research (e.g., How big should a buffer be around a centroid to define a

food desert? What are acceptable transit headways for trips to the grocery store? What is the definition of local?) and, perhaps more worrisome, by wasting precious career time for those academics and research practitioners who began studying the food system to solve its problems.

Two questions, both of which assume that this work is deeply political, need to be answered by individual researchers. The first question is whether the system needs minor reform or large-scale transformation. People will likely disagree on the answer to this question, much as people disagree on whether to require the labeling of transgenic foods. Clearly defining personal positions on the nature of the problem will help researchers contextualize the second question: What is the purpose of your research? If on the first count one believes the problems of the food system are minor and the system requires minor modification in response, then research on the current system and its many facets for quantification and reduction might make sense. Conversely, if one sees the problems as structural and systemic, complex and multifaceted, such a reformist research agenda is entirely insufficient to support necessary radical change.

In the latter case, research would need to focus on theories and practices that embrace complexity, that seek out and respect extant grassroots and autonomous food-movement activities, and that reject the hegemonic corporate industrial food system that lies at the root of most if not all food system problems. Again, there is an epistemological difference and a framing difference that the researcher should be clear about: a reformist agenda embraces a technologist's reductionist approach and frames global food system problems as ones of scarcity or resource development (due to population growth, food shortages, climate change, etc.). The radical agenda embraces the knowledge of the small-scale producers who grow most of the food on the planet, and frames the problems as ones of power, politics, and social and environmental justice.

In the reformist paradigm, much current research examines a wide variety of such things as methodological approaches to identifying and measuring food deserts, mapping "obesogenic" environments, and testing the caloric or nutrient

capabilities of transgenic crops. Proposed solutions merely tinker with the current system, such as locating grocery stores (often multinational chains) in food deserts, redeveloping neighborhoods to include a mix of land uses or be more walkable,¹ or, on the production side, growing crops such as genetically modified golden rice instead of traditional varieties. Articles based on these analyses are common in journals in planning, public health, and preventative medicine, as well as food studies. Though I am intentionally not citing specific works, they are easily found, generally well intended, and sometimes very well designed. However, such a research approach will not lead to a much-needed radical transformation of the food system.

Although much of this work might be important in a limited fashion, it is not a future-oriented agenda. As researchers in this model, the story arc is mostly written and we are left debating the best arrangement of deck chairs on the Titanic. At worst, in the reformist paradigm, we protect through our work an unjust food system. It is time to move to a radical research agenda supportive of food system transformation.

Perhaps it isn't surprising that research into the food system would steer clear of the issue of system transformation. In the current neoliberal environment, the role of the state has changed to more aggressively support capital, ensure healthy markets, and defend private property. Although I find the position difficult to defend, one need not be opposed to this long-term shift in purpose — but one should be aware of it. However, in planning and public policy, medicine, public health, and the biosciences, students are rarely taught much about this new context in which their work is situated, and researchers consider it only rarely. The idea that the state is beneficent, that its purpose is to control or regulate industry,² is simply outdated and misplaced. One does not have to look far to see the close connection, and potential for influence, between the state and corporate agribusiness and retailing. First lady Michelle Obama working

¹ In the interest of full disclosure: I have in the past been the recipient of funds through several U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) grants to do this type of work.

² Or that it is able.

with Walmart, the largest retailer in the world, on her Let's Move campaign, and Michael Taylor, the former Monsanto vice president of public policy, now serving as deputy commissioner for foods and veterinary medicine at the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, are but two of many such examples. And these do not even consider the influence of corporate campaign spending in a post-*Citizens United* world. It should come as no surprise to today's academic, activist, and policy-maker that the state and the corporate food regime are either unable or unwilling to solve food system failings. In the context of highly developed corporate vertical integration, a competitive multinational food industry, the use of unsustainable and inappropriate Green Revolution agricultural technologies, and the incessant drumbeat of open markets and global integration of previously subsistence-oriented agricultural economies of less-developed countries, the state and corporate industrialized food are the cause of food system failings, not their solution.

A New Path: Understanding Flight and Re-Assembly

Those who seek a fundamentally different food system based on democratic and ecological principles need to look elsewhere for solutions. Fortunately, examples are everywhere, both in the literature and in practice, once one knows what to look for. Following the antistate and anticapitalist theoretical work of Deleuze and Guattari, Virno, Eugene Holland (2011), and David Graeber (2004) (among others), it is possible to conceive of a radically democratic, autonomous, interlinked food system that would be starkly different from the one we have now. Such a system would hinge upon a different set of social values and operating principles organized from the ground up, and it would be founded upon networked groups that have exited the current food-as-commodity capitalist system. These groups would be linked but not hierarchically controlled, democratically operated, and responsible to their local networks, not to global capital. A five-year research agenda would begin to identify, understand, and determine how to assist and connect examples of community-based programs that collectively represent an exodus from the old system and subsequent new

assemblages of organizations that, in turn, help individuals and groups remain outside its grasp.


Such a program would need to recognize reformist ideas and research agendas, and selectively support some of them. But at the same time, it would need to clearly delineate an alternative long-term strategy based in building a distinctly oppositional, nonstate, radically democratic food system. Reformist work is important, as Holland (2011) reminds us, because it is both immediately possible and has an impact on people today. Such reform-based research would become supportive of and secondary to a main research agenda of understanding how to nurture those already doing the radical work of transforming the food system.

A research agenda consistent with food system transformation would focus on organizations of the exodus and would include identifying and describing them, and understanding and supporting their needs. This agenda would also seek to understand how these organizations conceive of autonomy and democracy in their actions and organization. For many places in the global South, for example, radical democratic change is understood to be vital to other concerns, such as access to land, resources, nutrition, and cultural preservation. The new research agenda asks where and what these movements are, what the relationships are between these concepts and movements, and how these movements might grow and connect with other, similar movements around the world.

A research agenda with a five-year horizon would include identifying known organizations that might represent an exodus (e.g., Via Campesina, CEDICAM in Oaxaca, Mexico, Food Commons in the U.S., and many others at every scale). It would seek to discover what is already there, but is just outside the typical planning or policy lens. Some of these organizations or movements might seem inconsequential in the big picture, but taken collectively they are constructing, or are in the constant process of becoming, the exodus from capital-controlled food systems. When viewed as part of a larger collective — a rhizomatically (or non-centrally) organized group — these organizations take on new significance. The identification process would begin to track the scope of their activities and geographies.

Researchers would also seek to understand why the groups turned away from the industrial food regime, and how they see their work situated with regard to it. How many of them are fighting against it, and how many are simply choosing to ignore it and do their own work instead? How many, as Deleuze and Guattari say, take a piece of the system with them when they leave so that it will eventually collapse under its own weight? How are they networking, and to what extent are they engaged in what Eugene Holland calls a “slow-motion general strike” — a noncentralized, growing rejection of the current state and capitalism? How do they organize their efforts, and how do they see different oppositional responses to the industrial food regime organizing collectively?

In this vision, researchers and food system planners are not experts, and they do not lead. Instead, they ask how these groups could be supported by research, by each other, and by the embedded power and multiple forms of knowledge represented in the exodus. In an explicitly normative way, researchers would listen to new groups with new ears. Researchers would prioritize the needs of communities, groups, and projects operating consistently with principles of self-organization, democracy, and environmental sustainability, and would turn away from lines of agribusiness and biotechnology (“life sciences”), and refuse research that supports the corporate-capitalist food system. This would require another reframing for researchers, causing them to abandon the notion of objective research and

consider whether their work supports corporate neoliberalism or democratic autonomous communities. After listening and developing understanding, researchers could then begin identifying opportunities for linking assemblages of the exodus, amplifying the variety of counterhegemonic work being done, and assisting groups in building a new, just, and environmentally sustainable food system. That agenda will take longer than five years, but it becomes a worthy study. 

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