

A Discourse Regarding the Precarious Relationship Between Organic Food, Equality, and the “Ideal” Way to Eat

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ABSTRACT

Food security is decreasing among the racialized and disenfranchised. The neo-liberal “status quo” must be broken in order to reclaim food security for all citizens and eliminate food as a source of human precarity and inferior health outcomes. This essay will borrow from Butler’s argument regarding the need for an energized, activated, and engaged populace, as impetus for forming new, wider frameworks for reducing precarity and food insecurity. In addition, connections to current interdisciplinary scholarship about how food security can be increased through greater attention to the vastness of cultural, ethnic and non-normative repertoires around nutrition, moral eating and ethical eating. Public policy and institutional change regarding access to organic food for all citizens will only come through this interdisciplinary approach, which favors a devaluing of the neo-liberalist ideal of organic food as a vehicle best suited for elitist consumption.

1. Introduction and Overview of the Problem

Despite its 20 percent per year growth over the past decade (Raynolds, 2004, p. 725), the organic food “movement” has become a controversial issue in interdisciplinary scholarship due to the recent phenomenon of organic food belonging only to elites, as opposed to a human right for all citizens, as the early environmentalists intended organic to mean and signify (Johnston, et al., 2011).

In “For and Against Precarity,” Butler (2011) illuminates the neo-liberal impacts to “disposable” populations (p. 12). These populations are at the mercy of market-based economic systems that favor the wealthy and

the institutions served by and for wealthier citizens. As Butler states, the capitalist system reinforces the idea that market forces ultimately determine who should have health care and access to other goods and services that provide human nourishment, and who should not. Those who do not “deserve” equal rights, according to the biased system are the disposables.

The “distribution and availability of food” (Butler, 2011, p. 12) - and more specifically – access to healthy, local, organic food, is one example where the wealthy are favored and secure, and food “insecurity” (Ostry, et al., 2010) is often the norm among the disenfranchised. The goal of this essay is to illuminate how food insecurity is intricately linked with precarious bodies, and how lack of

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access to healthy, organic food perpetuates food insecurity and precarity.

Food security is a core issue in interdisciplinary studies, where social status, economic status, race, ethnicity, gender, employment status and living environment all impact health outcomes and access to nourishing food that either sustains or detracts from healthy living and positive health outcomes. Additionally, the very issue of social determinants of health, popularized in feminist and progressive health and environmental activist scholarship, is fundamentally supported by the precariousness of the global food supply and what it means to eat “ethically” (Johnston, et al., 2011, p. 293). In order to understand the implications of unethical eating and food insecurity, and its significant contribution to precarious bodies, food security must be examined in the broadest possible sense, which considers a diverse body of knowledge and evidence-based scholarship, including the work of Michel Foucault and Taylor’s (2014) arguments against Foucault’s views of food and sex as contrarian “aesthetics of existence.”

If food security is allowed to proliferate, notions of access to organic food will move from its current realm of perceived “elitism” to a collective force for equality, justice, and sustainability for all citizens, regardless of social status, economic status, gender identity, or ethnic background. The argument presented is that an interdisciplinary approach must be implemented in order to make food insecure citizens once again secure. Additionally, it is argued that access to nourishing food should be considered a human right that transcends all economic, ethnic and social boundaries. Finally, where free markets cannot satisfy this basic human need, governments must collectively offer and supply food security to citizens in a way that makes sense globally, regionally, and locally.

2. Precarious Bodies and the Issue of Organic Food

Foucault reasoned that discourses are not paradigms, but rather various segments of ideas and analysis that can be modified and reconnected in myriad ways (Taylor, 2012). In this way, the discourse presented is based on current research regarding food security. However, the factors that influence food security, including the marketplace for food, stakeholders, consumer preferences, government policies, among others, are constantly in flux. Therefore, food security is also an issue that must be reconsidered when changes to any of these variables also occur.

Still, food security for all citizens is the end goal to reduce precarity. Ostry, et al. (2010) offers the following definition of food security:

Where everyone obtains a safe, personally acceptable, nutritious diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes self-reliance and justice.

Food security is decreasing among the racialized and disenfranchised. An international diet, due to globalization, has also raised mortality rates and increased lifestyle related disease (Abramson, 2009, p. 150). Abramson (2009) also documents problems with diminishing water supplies and plastic packaging, as well as the fact that not all citizens can afford organic food. In addition, more than half of Canadians are overweight from a poor diet and sedentary lifestyle (Abramson, 2009, p. 148).

Activism in food security has grown, and scholarship about how to close the food security gap has become more diverse, interdisciplinary, and evidence-based. Butler (2011) states that citizens are demanding “a more fundamental restructuring of our socio-economic and political order” (p. 12). Similarly, De Sario (2007) argues that “the issue of precarity has developed into a new catalyst for activism” (p. 21). This activism can range from issues of gender, environment, health and social inequalities, among many others. The connecting link is that all of these issues – and the health and welfare of human life – depends on a healthy and nourished populace. It is necessary to explore the borderlands of each issue to glean ways and methodologies where activism can translate into new public and social policies.

Michel Foucault recognized dominant discourses in comparing the view of sex in the modern West with that of food in ancient Greco-Roman period as a type of discourse-paradigm that involves not just economic and moral, but also sociological and political nuances that should be considered, but are frequently not part of, the dominant discourse (Taylor, 2010).

In keeping with Foucault’s view that the dominant discourse should not be uniform and stable, but rather subject to revision and more evidence-based conjecture, Chloe (2010) argues against the Foucauldian view of food with the argument that “contemporary food choices, along with and intertwined with sexuality, continue to function as practices of self-constitution in both disciplinary and aesthetic fashions” (p. 72). In this view, intersectionalities exist between food and sex, rather than one favoring the other as Foucault suggested.

This is an important consideration in examining the critical issues of food security and the precariousness of food in the modern intersectionalized social, economic and political context. Indeed, Foucault’s views of food began as ethical inquiries, but Taylor (2010; 2014) argues that

Foucault grew to see food security as a political issue, much more than a strictly ethical one. While Taylor (2014) in essence agrees with Foucault in his political stance around food and food security, the similarities end there.

In fact, Taylor presents a strong argument about why Foucault is incorrect in his assumption about the food/sex tradeoff, particularly in examining these “aesthetics” (Taylor, 2014, p. 1043) in contrasting contexts of modern Western belief systems and practices versus ancient Roman and Greek views.

As Chloe (2014) outlines in “Foucault and Food,” Foucault presented his views of the ethics of eating in the early 1980s, where the modern obsession and conception of sex, which is often unhealthy, is equivalent to the way the early Greeks were obsessed with food and dietary matters. Foucault essentially “rejected” (Taylor, 2014, p. 1046) the view of morality as universally accepted in ancient Greco-Roman cultures regarding aesthetic choices. Chloe contends that Foucault’s ideas were at its core incorrect, other than his replacing a morality view with a political analysis of aesthetic choices and preferences. Utilizing the Animal Liberation Movement and the dietetics of ethical vegetarianism, Chloe argues that the modern-day vegan movement is founded on much more than moral ground alone. Chloe argues that it could take on a chiefly aesthetic rather than moral strategy, “in order to pursue what Foucault once described as an ethics of acts and their pleasures which would be able to take into account the pleasure of the other” (p. 72).

In looking at the modern day agriculture industry and not necessarily just the Animal Liberation movement that Chloe analyzes, Johnston, et al. (2011) describes the paradoxical nature of the global agricultural industry. North America is perhaps the best example of the widening gap between the food secure and the precarious bodies of the food insecure. For example, the scholars state the following:

We know that many so-called ethical products – organic produce, grass-fed meat, fair trade coffee, free-range eggs – are more expensive than their conventional counterparts. In addition, many of the shopping and eating spaces articulating a discourse of ethical consumption, such as Whole Foods Market, are positioned to serve economic elites (p. 293).

The scholars further acknowledge that the problem of bolstering access to organic food for the food insecure requires more than a “simple dichotomy” to solve the problem (p. 294). In other words, it is not as simple as opening a Whole Foods Market in a poor neighborhood, if that would even be possible. In their qualitative study of

the lived experience of what it means to eat “ethically” or sustainably, Johnston, et al. (2011) do a commendable job of opening a discourse across income, class, ethnic and gender borderlands, and come to the conclusion that “privilege does appear to facilitate access to dominant ethical eating repertoires, and... environmental considerations figure strongly in these repertoires” (p. 293).

If we are as a society to believe that precarity of the body has an “ideal” state of health that is bolstered by nourishing food and access to it, then there must be hope for the food insecure, and society must find ways to provide access in greater numbers, despite the prevailing precarious repertoire that dominates the food insecure.

3. Reducing Precarity; Solution for Food Insecurity

Johnston, et al. (2011) explore a possible future of food security for all citizens, with the conclusion that a multi-cultural, interdisciplinary – and largely anthropological – approach must be undertaken in order to make inroads to overcoming precarity for the food insecure. For example, the authors state that low income citizens without access to organic food are not “amoral” in the way they perceive food, but their cultural cognitive sets and backgrounds often do not match that of, for example, the typical Whole Foods customer. The recommendation the authors provide based on their documentation of what ethical eating means to the vast cross section of subjects in various Toronto communities, is to move toward more “creative adaptations of dominant ethical eating repertoires to fit low income circumstances, as well as the use of different cultural frameworks to address moral issues around eating” (p. 297). These creative adaptations could come from public policy, lobbyist groups, local organizations, nonprofits, among other possible institutions that work toward reducing food insecurity.

The “global anti-neoliberal movement” (De Sario, 2007, p. 22) is the antithesis of the evolution of how healthy, locally-grown organic food and farmers’ markets moved from the natural state of supporting and nourishing human health for all citizens, to representing a type of unsustainable “elitist” way of eating that is somehow reserved for the wealthy. This is the fundamental perception that must be changed. Migrant labour is often optimized for the benefit of wealthy consumers who buy organic food at high price points. Reynolds (2004) proposes a “commodity network approach” to the global organic food supply (p. 725). The local food movement works for suburban – often wealthy – consumers.

However, the solution to greater access for the food precarious is to address the “key contradictions between mainstream agro-industrial and alternative movement conventions in global organic networks” (Raynolds, 2004, p. 725).

Instead of deepening knowledge of these contradictions, the organic food industry has instead catered more and more to the wealthy, disallowing alternative frameworks that match the unique cultural and ethnic discourses of what ethical eating really means, as Johnston, et al. (2011) uncovered. Surely, organic networks could address these distribution differences in ways that sustain life and increase secure access for migrant workers, immigrants, poor urban citizens and the socially disenfranchised.

Finally, Butler introduces the term precariousness to describe how we are all, in an existential sense, bodies that are possible subjects for trauma, illness, extinction, among other outcomes, and for this reason we are, whether we choose to accept it or not, all interdependent. Human interdependence and the sustainability of our species requires greater attention to food security for all citizens, and the ethics and morality of providing access to

nourishing food for life sustaining health must be addressed using the tools and deep knowledge that only interdisciplinary scholarship can provide.

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