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Food Systems Under Pressure

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Editorial

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Introduction – why food? Why now?

This special section represents an exciting new multiplatform collection that contains a range of contributions that all focus on contemporary food systems and the ways in which they operate to influence consumption patterns. In addition to conventional research papers, the section also includes a *Sociology in Action* paper containing a shorter opinion piece and *Beyond the Text*, which is a creative audio-visual contribution. Some of the papers derive from the seventh conference of the British Sociological Association Food Studies Group held in Prato, 24–25 June 2019. The theme of the original conference was food systems and society, given that throughout the world food systems face many challenges ranging from climate change and sustainability, trade wars and financialization, urbanization and ageing societies in addition to persisting social inequalities and food insecurity. Since the conference food systems have also had to deal with the Covid pandemic and, in the UK, Brexit. Indeed, the global pandemic served to further expose national and international food inequalities, as well as the complexity and fragility of food systems (Kakaei et al., 2022). Many of these themes were thus revisited in the 2021 BSA Food Study Group Conference *Food, Food Systems and Times of Insecurity*, including how to link change at the macro-level and with everyday practices.

The contributions focus on very different subjects but share core themes relating to food consumption practices and their governance at micro- and macro-levels, illustrating the links between everyday practice and wider social and political systems. Some also explore how we might change our food systems to bring together concerns for social justice, health and sustainability. They also demonstrate different ways in which to conceptualize and analyse food systems and as such also represent what we might call a 'systems turn' in the sociology of food, as they demonstrate the need to understand

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consumption practices within the wider context of social, political and financial systems within which they are embedded. So perhaps a return to the pioneering work of Audrey Richards (1932, 1939) in the 1920s and 1930s, who was the first to take a systems approach to understanding food consumption practices in the 1920s and 1930s with her famous studies of the Bemba people. As Warin, one of the contributing authors, notes, we are now seeing again the 'metabolic rift' that Marx identified at the end of 19th century between the system of capitalist food production and social systems, with the latter now including concerns for equity, public health and the need to mitigate climate change. This was particularly pertinent as the recent *Covid-19* lockdown played out in the UK with celebrities such as Marcus Rashford marshalling public opinion to change government policy on 'free school meals' for children outside of term time through lockdown. This is arguably indicative of a growing dissatisfaction with government policies that penalize the poor (Bulman, 2022; Scott, 2021) and a strength of feeling amongst the general public about the importance of access to 'good' food for *all* children.

Beyond this, all papers share an interest in the links between micro-level practices and experience, with meso- or macro-level food regimes and systems. They are inter-disciplinary, particularly the paper by Jack who presents a compelling overview of food systems through analysis of accounting and financial communications. Moreover, they demonstrate an overarching concern with public sociology (Burawoy, 2005) or how sociology can and does contribute to knowledge across professional, critical, policy and public domains. There is an inherent political focus too, whether this is explicit in Warin's paper on discourses of neo-liberal governmentality and how they dictate the ways in which people are positioned as responsible for their health or Coveney's opinion piece, which provides a re-imagining of food systems rising from the ruins of capitalism. Overall, they are concerned with change, what needs to be done, how and with who. There are no single orientations across the papers, instead they illustrate the need to think across epistemic boundaries. Similarly at a policy level they demonstrate the need to break down policy silos. Food is big on the policy agenda and prominent in the sustainable development goals at international level, but change is hard to achieve and these contributions identify some of the barriers and potential ways forward.

Overview of the contributions

In the first paper in the collection, Warin presents an ethnographic study of a community-based programme to address childhood obesity in South Australia. She shows how the construction of obesity in neoliberal policy discourses as due to 'poor' lifestyle choice diverts attention from the social determinants of health and further that consideration of cultural practices remain absent in the design of public health interventions. Warin identifies two sets of cultural practices that are relevant here – not only those associated with the shared meanings of food and everyday consumption practices, but also the cultures of food and nutrition policies. Food is thus decontextualized as nutrition and obesity depoliticized creating an impasse to finding effective public health solutions. As she notes, this creates a 'metabolic rift' between our rich sociological understanding of how food systems work and how consumption patterns are shaped with the dominant neoliberal policy discourses around obesity.

The next paper by Jack also examines the difficulty of achieving change within the context of contemporary food systems, but focuses on the financial practices embedded within the food supply network in high income countries and draws upon on the sociology of accounting. Her highly original inter-disciplinary study throws light on accounting as a social practice at the meso-level of food systems and specifically the embedded practice of 'always getting discount'. In the first part of the paper, Jack reviews the literature on the sociologies of food and accounting to show how accounting is a calculative practice that lies at the heart of the organizational and supplies networks in highly competitive supermarket-led food systems. Narrow profit margins have led to each entity in the food system demanding discounts to generate any profits. The institutionalization of this practice impedes change to create more sustainable and equitable food systems. A case-study of alternative food distribution networks in Canada and the USA illustrates how they too are trapped in this system.

The third paper by Wills and Dickinson is also concerned with systems and more specifically how social systems at the meso- and micro-level influence the food security of older people. There is little research on the role of social capital in relation to food security. They draw on Bourdieu and his concept of social capital and using innovative mixed methods to explore the role of social networks in peoples' food practices and the degree to which their participation in social networks at the community level influenced their vulnerability to food insecurity. They found that both bridging and bonding social capital were important for older people and allowed them to leverage various forms of support that allowed them to maintain their food security. Social capital was also important for peoples' wider health and wellbeing. The findings were discussed amongst a range of local stakeholders from the formal health sector, civil society, as well as food providers including retailers to explore possible solutions to enhance the coping capacities of older people in relation to food. Again linking food with wider wellbeing was seen as important by the stakeholders and the authors echo Warin in arguing that food security needs to be recognized as more than access to food and nutrients. They conclude that more work is needed on understanding social capital in relation to food security across different types of household, but warn that promoting social capital in communities should not be seen as a replacement for other public policies to support older people.

Civil society groups were among the stakeholders who Wills and Dickinson engaged with and the role of community food providers in Scotland is explored further by Gordon et al. Conventionally the main role of these organizations is seen as service provision, often food distribution, to support households suffering food insecurity, but employing a quasi ethnographic approach with a range of organizations working at the micro- and meso-levels they found that they also play a vital role in advocacy. This is an important finding given the critique in the literature on food poverty and justice in food systems, as the work of community food providers may perpetuate unjust food systems if it does not address the causes of constrained access to food. Gordon et al. show, however, that these organizations engaged in many forms of advocacy and meso-level organizations were able to engage with policy actors at higher institutional levels and draw attention to the causes of food insecurity. As such they can be effective agents of change, but, Wills and Dickinson, also warn against over-reliance on community food providers and that broader policy change is still needed.

This special issue contains a new platform Beyond the Text for audio-visual contributions. Food on the Margins is a short 'fly on the wall' documentary film that shows the food stories of six people who are experiencing food insecurity. It was inspired by participatory food research project to explore and understand the food experiences of people living in vulnerable communities in Plymouth, UK. The aim was to give the marginalized a voice and to conduct the research as one of co-production and the film was co-created with the study participants. The accompanying text discusses the ethics and challenges of participatory research and also how knowledge co-creation is a powerful way to access lived experiences and can have the power to inform policy recommendations.

We choose to end the special issue with the *Sociology in Action* piece of John Coveney. While subtitled an introduction, he presents a fascinating discussion of the changing ways in which we not only produce and eat food but the ways in which we think about food and what we expect food to do for us. He identifies a key historical shift starting from the 18th century with the development of the scientific study of nutrition that led to our current disenchantment with food and food systems. This is equivalent to the culture of nutrition in policy and metabolic rift that Warin identifies in which food is framed solely as a source of nutrients for the body with no consideration for social, ethical and other concerns. Looking to the future, Coveney argues, we need to re-instate our appreciation of these wider dimensions of food and eating to meet the many challenges facing our food systems.

- No Appetite for Change: Culture, Liberalism and other Acts of Depoliticization in the Australian Obesity Debate, Megan Warin
- Discounts as a barrier to change in our food systems, Lisa Jack
- Vulnerability to food insecurity among older people: the role of social capital, Wendy Wills and Angela Dickinson
- Third sector advocacy: An exploration of the work of community food providers, Katy Gordon et al.

Beyond the text

- Food on the Margins: A Creative Film Collaboration to Amplify the Voices of those Living with Food Insecurity, Clare Pettinger, James Ellwood

Sociology in action pieces

- The re-enchantment of food: an introduction, John Coveney

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Author biographies

Julie Parsons is an Associate Professor in Sociology and Criminology at the University of Plymouth. She was convenor of the British Sociological Association's Food Studies Group from 2017–2022. She is passionate about food justice and is currently editing a book on the role of food in rehabilitation and resettlement for criminal justice affected people.

Alizon Draper was a Reader in Food and Public Health at the University of Westminster. She has a background in social anthropology and nutrition and has been involved in extensive research in the UK and internationally on many topics relating to food and nutrition.