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THEMATIC SECTION

From Food as Commodity to Food as Liberation

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Abstract
For the capitalist way of organizing people and nature, food is nothing but a commodity. Any meaningful transformation of the dominant food system must thus be based on the decommodification and liberation of food and all the elements that make food systems possible (labour, land, seeds, etc.). The notions of commons and commoning can be allies in this journey, helping different anti-capitalist fights to converge and avoid corporate cooptation.

Keywords Food systems · Decommodification · Commons · Cooptation · Principles

Decommodification Is Not Just any Other Word

At the opening of the UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS), UN Secretary-General António Guterres stated, 'Food is not a commodity, it's a human right'.[1] After signing a strategic agreement with the World Economic Forum and launching a two-year process with organizations that work hand-in-glove with the food and agriculture corporations that rely on the commodification of food for their significant profits, this was a perplexing statement. Food has been integrated in the global trading system and is treated by the actors in the capitalist agri-food systems as nothing but a commodity. However, other and older ways to consider food and food systems exist and have existed for centuries. Moreover, they have a greater potential to serve human well-being and environmental regeneration. This is what we explore in this article.

Commodification has multiple consequences. First of all, subordinating access to a price necessarily excludes those who cannot afford whatever price has been assigned. Therefore, something that is as essential for life as oxygen becomes unavailable due to poverty; this is surely the most unjust aspect of food commodification. In addition, commodification strips away all the other values that are associated with food and food systems, such as connections with the sacred, livelihoods that go beyond income, social adhesion furthered through commensality, and shared meanings and traditions rooted in shared memories and activities. Treating food as a commodity over-simplifies and overshadows the complexity of social and ecological relationships that make food possible, fragmenting the complexity of processes and interactions that lie behind everything that is eaten, creating the conditions for social and environmental externalities, food loss and waste, exploited labour and highly remunerated capital.

'Food is different'. Food is not just another commodity. Social movements, Indigenous people and writers have been telling us this for decades, if not centuries (Rosset 2006; Vivero-Pol 2013; Coté 2016); but this uniqueness has not been at the center of the conversations on transition, transformation and redefinition. Only recently, amid calls for transformation of the global food system, do we see increasing references to the need to de-commodify food and to reinforce alternative paradigms. For example, European and North-American scholars have been promoting the idea of food and food systems as commons as intellectual and concrete ways to de-commodify the food systems. Yet, many of these allusions to commodification and the commons are

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[1] United Nations Food System Summit (23 September) Keynotes Remarks, H.E. António Gutteres 'Making Food Systems Work for People, Planet and Prosperity'.

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based in what we believe to be limited, partial or incomplete conceptions. Moreover, these calls for the 'commons' seldom consider that the terminology itself is historically and geographically characterized, and that it cannot be universalized without the risk of dismantling the plurality of epistemologies and knowledges.

In this article we seek to strengthen the call for decommodification of food and food systems through the adoption of broad concepts and attributes that we emphatically associate with visions aligned with the idea of the commons and visions of what is not 'commons'. Commons is not meant as a universal or all-encompassing term. Rather, we see commons as an intellectual and political pathway for decommodification and liberation of enclosed and privatized food systems. As such, commons (or any other word that reflects the political and intellectual horizon of decommodification) can act as the antidote to the industrial food system under capitalism. Treating food as a commons and building commons-based food systems can heal much of the destruction of the web of life (Capra 1996) and social relations that industrialization within neoliberal governments has caused (Ferrando et al. 2020). They are an essential part of a just and ecological transition from food systems that thrive through hunger, environmental degradation and inequity.

Commons are fundamentally antithetical to the enclosure and exploitation of humans and nature, the 'cheapening' of nature and humans that Patel and Moore (2018) decry. Underlying this exploitation are deep social injustices based in patriarchy, colonization, militarism and racism—all driven by fears that there isn't 'enough' for everyone and those with power must control nature and other people in whatever ways they can in order to preserve their privileges.

Without changing the deepest mindset of how we view food systems, real transformation is not possible. The reforms that have been promoted in venues such as the UN Food Systems Summit may result in some improvements for some people but will not lead to universal well-being and repair of the damages that the capitalist food system and the dominant economic thinking have generated to the communities and the environment. Not surprisingly, resistance to changing the commodity mindset is expressed by corporations and governments allied with them: a decommodified and commons-based mindset would require sharing power and giving up the illusion of control and unlimited growth and accumulation.

Commons and Commoning to Decommodify the Food System

From Food as a Commons to Food Systems as a Commons

Food is a multidimensional reality, a 'bundle of ecological relationships', an 'essential for human beings', a 'human right', a 'cultural determinant', and a 'renewable resource' that is rooted in nature (Vivero-Pol 2018). Food as a commodity is reduced to a fungible good characterized only by its 'exchange value'. Its production, its distribution and its consumption are defined on the basis of financial desires and economic return, not as a reflection of needs and utility. This commodified interpretation of food has been central to the creation of the global food regime since the colonial era (Friedmann and McMichael 1989) and has been central to the reproduction of social and economic injustices worldwide and to the current ecological crisis. This unidimensional, fragmented and fundamentally unjust construction of food is the root of contemporary misery (Marks 2011). To tackle this view, Indigenous people, scholars, activists, and grassroot movements around the world are advocating for a new understanding of food and food systems. For some, the idea of the 'commons' as the source of food can play a transformative role in gathering multiple struggles, offer a common political horizon for the decommodification of food systems, and offer some principles and guidelines to liberate the potential of food as a central component of the web of life.

Commons-based food systems are a reality around the world and have been existing for much longer than the current commodity-based food systems. The enclosure of the commons and the regenerative potential of nature and human beings is the basis of the contemporary capitalist food system (Federici 2019). When this enclosure has not yet happened, we see practical examples of regenerative relations with nature as well as inclusive and caring relations between community members and among living species. However, food commons cannot be just, fair, and sustainable islands within an ocean of plundering and exploitation. It is key today to strengthen our conceptual understanding of food commons and start rethinking not food, but the *entire* food system as based on and regenerative of commons—in other words, a common of commons (Pettenati et al. 2018). Food should be understood as just one moment of a complex set of nested and interrelated socio-ecological systems that are intertwined and interconnected. This is because it is not possible to decommodify food without decommodifying all the elements and processes necessary for its existence. The land, the water, the seeds and other genetic resources, along with the material

infrastructures, the productive labour and the care labour that make food possible must be decommodified (Pettenati et al. 2018).

To decommodify the food system, we need to 'destroy' the commodity form and its material and intellectual implications, but also engage in the constructive process that Linebaugh (2014) has defined as 'commoning'. Commoning is a many-fold concept. It is about pulling together and sharing material or immaterial resources in an ecological way that is shaped by the cycles of nature and human needs. And it also implies engaging in an inclusive and collective decision-making process so as to regenerate the resources that make food possible, provide benefits to all members of the community in a just and equitable way, and ensure a viable future for the next generations. Some institutional devices already exist that can ease and secure the 'commoning' process such as, for instance, *community land trusts, community-supported agriculture* and *food policy councils*. If properly set up, they will be able to free the commons from enclosures and put an end to the plunder via the capitalistic and proprietary nature of the current food system. However, commoning goes beyond the creation of local food systems.

Inspiring Principles for Food Decommodification

One of the fundamental traits of the mainstream corporate food system is the 'capitalist conatus' (De Angelis 2017),[2] that is, the vicious cycle whereby labour and nature are treated as commodities that can be bought with money and then sold for more money and so on, leading to cheap prices, negative externalities and unlimited corporate accumulation. Of course, the decommodification of the food system would not entail going back to barter and the disappearance of trade. However, it needs recognition of the value of food systems beyond price, of the interconnections between all of its components, of the current inequalities and historical imbalances, and that this complexity cannot be reflected and addressed only by price-based transactions. There is no magic bullet to decommodify the food system. Nor is there a single doctrine or roadmap telling how to liberate the commons that are at the core of the food systems and have been progressively enclosed. However, it is possible to highlight a core set of guiding attributes that can inspire a vision of and process to decommodified food systems.

By drawing upon theories of commons scholars theories such as Massimo De Angelis (2017) and Silvia Federici (2019), and from the knowledge of Indigenous communities and fisherfolks and other small-scale food producers who are relentlessly opposing the ongoing commodification of their local food systems, we identified four key attributes that seem to frame the shared understanding of a decommodified food system: (a) a non-dualistic ontology of human-nature as interconnected components of the web of life; (b) an anti-racist and critical feminist approach that recognizes race-based injustices within the food system (from labour to access) and adequately rewards the productive and reproductive labour that is mainly done by women all along the food chain; (c) a decolonial and anti-militarist stand that addresses the legacy of colonialism in existing global food chains, the link between global logistics and the military complex, and the use of technologies to discipline workers and lives (Khalili 2020); and (d) a participatory, inclusive, and democratic decision-making process. Commons is not only a matter of rejecting private property over natural resources: it is a way of radically engaging with everything that makes food possible, from land to our understanding of past, gender and modernity.

First of all, commons-based food systems acknowledge and regenerate the complexity and interconnectedness of the web of life (Capra, 1996. The dualistic ontology of Western civilization, based upon the idea that 'we' (humans) are separate and superior to 'that' (nature) represents the conceptual grid that enabled and justified the past and current depletion and plunder of local and global ecosystems (Patel and Moore 2018). This is reproduced by commodification as fragmentation, separation of the individual components and appropriation. Following what Indigenous knowledges and cultures around the world teach us, decommodification is intertwined with the understanding that the Western ontology is a misleading worldview. To change the paradigm, we must recognize that human and non-human beings are all part of the same and unique web of life, along with the rest of our planetary ecosystem.

Second, in a commons-based food system, race and gender are not fixed and exclusionary concepts that provide tools for discrimination, subordination or white paternalism (Belay and Mugambe 2021), but levers to redress historical inequalities and an opportunity for consolidating the plurality of visions, cultural richness and diversity of perspectives. Racism and patriarchy are inner features of the current discriminatory and exploitative food system (Patel and Moore 2018), and the consequence of historical ontologies that considered non-white and non-male bodies as appropriable and disposable objects (Federici 2004). Racism and patriarchy are closely linked with the creation of cheapened and disposable labour and care work that is central to the construction of the food commodity and t commodity-based

[2] De Angelis stresses the difference between the *capitalist conaturs* (M > C > M') where money is used to buy commodities then sold for more money and so on. And the *commons conatus* (C > M > C) where money is essentially used to exchange goods between people and communities.

food systems (Patel and Moore 2018). To decommodify our local and global food systems it is fundamental to adopt effective anti-racist and critical feminist approaches so as to unveil and tackle rooted discriminations and exploitations.

Third, decommodified food systems are inherently territorial, agroecological, socially and culturally diverse, rooted in the work of small-scale producers and socio-ecologically diverse. Moreover, they are premised on the reparation and restoration of present and past injustices. There cannot be a commons-based food system if the distribution of natural resources, the availability of wealth, the 'conventional' way of farming, the distribution of food, and the daily lives of people are still defined by the legacy of colonialism and by the practices of militarism and securitization. Decolonization and anti-militarism are thus necessary features of commons-based food systems as a form of liberation of present and past forms of appropriation and subordination of communities, territories and individual lives. They are what enable social, economic, and ecological reparation and ward off veiled forms of imperialism (i.e., the civilizing mission (Guthman 2011) typical of western countries, international organizations, and corporations (Koskenniemi 2001; Tzouvala 2020).

Finally, and perhaps on a more operative level, commons-based food systems are inclusive, participatory, and democratic systems based on collective decision-making processes where communities make decisions that enhance the living conditions of all their members within the limits of the environment in which they are embedded and for the regeneration of social and biological diversity (Peter 2021). Dialogue, cooperation and collectively crafted institutions are the essential tools through which communities can engage in regenerative social and ecological relationships. A decommodified food system is the premise for and consequence of 'food sovereignty' (Via Campesina 2007) as a condition for farmers, fisherfolks, Indigenous people and communities to autonomously decide which food systems they wish to live. Therefore, thinking in terms of commons calls for self-determination, the rights of peasants, fisherfolks and other people working in the food system (UNDROP 2018).

Commons food systems are therefore incompatible with the institutions that characterize the corporate and capitalist food systems: the individualistic and exclusionary understanding of property; the accumulation of power and resources in few hands; the subordination of the state to the agenda of the private sector, with the marginalization of the people who provide food; the idea of science as the product of experiments and laboratories and ivory towers rather than the outcome of centuries of ecological interactions with the planet and continuous adaptation to the changing landscape (Anderson 2018); the corporation as a legal structure with no limit and aimed at perennial accumulation; the international system of trade in food; and the hyper-financialization of food markets to reward investors rather than fulfilling people and planet's needs. To decommodify our local and global food systems will not be a simple task for we are not just playing a game against one or multiple 'enemies'. It is not just a matter of finding the best 'strategy'. It is a matter of altogether changing the dominant paradigm and the way in which food and food systems are thought about and discussed. Only then can we destroy current structures that have crystallized the commodity form and have been made by, and favor, profit rather than needs and rights.

As we discuss in the next section, while this conceptualization of commons has rapidly gained strength among civil society actors, we see the private sector attempting to undermine it by co-opting the term.

Risks of Cooptation/Misunderstanding of Decommodification

During the UNFSS Pre-Summit, Ramon Laguarta, the CEO of PepsiCo, one of the largest food and drinks conglomerates in the world, was asked about the commodification of food and whether this represented an obstacle in the transition towards sustainable food systems. Rather than denying or avoiding a question that could have required a challenge to the very existence of a corporation with an annual profit of USD 7.12 billion in 2020,[3] gained by selling junk food, Laguarta surprised the audience with a clear 'it's true'. Was that a moment of revelation and the beginning of a new chapter in the history of one of the largest food corporations in the world? Was it a mistake? It was neither of them. Rather, it was the planned attempt to domesticate critiques, dismiss any corporate responsibility for the current state of the food systems and transform risks into a new business opportunity.

'Yes, it's true', Laguarta said, confirming that commodification represents an obstacle in the pathway towards sustainability. But what did he mean by commodification? Was he referring to the structural problem that has to do with the exclusionary nature of the commodity form, the inherent alienation of labour and nature that makes food cheap, the transformation of relationships into monetary value, the fact that commodification is intertwined with financialization, the corporate form and unlimited accumulation? No. He had in mind the fact that positive and negative externalities have no price. He referred to the problem that consumers are not yet willing to pay for living incomes for producers or sustainable practices, therefore corporations cannot sell them.

[3] https://www.macrotrends.net/stocks/charts/PEP/pepsico/net-income.

For Laguarta: '[Corporations and their CEOs] need to create much more value around food. We need to educate consumers on the value of food. That regenerative food is different from non-regenerative food. Diverse food is different from non-diverse. So that this value transfers to consumers'.[4] Commodification, from a corporate perspective, can only be 'overcome' with *more* commodification. That is, the fact that the value of food is only the one texpressed through a price can be solved by translating what is currently external to the price (social and environmental externalities) into 'new' exchange value, and, therefore, into a commodity.

The attempt by Laguarta to use commodification as a response to the problems created by commodification should not come as a surprise, considering that true-cost pricing can be seen as a 'way of keeping the architecture of government essentially the same' and yet more 'magical thinking' that the market will solve all problems simply by pricing them better (Patel 2021: 633). This is what happens any time that corporate actors stick social and environmental claims on the packaging of 'ethical' or 'sustainable' food and sell it to eaters at a premium, through the same global commodity chains and with the same uneven distribution of value—or even seizing a larger percentage than with the 'non-ethical' food. The urgency to improve the food system is translated into a product that is sold to consumers, a solution that does not challenge the structural issues behind the corporate food system but rather promotes the idea that corporations are essential in promoting the 'green' and 'just' transition. As we mentioned above, corporate players that sell 'sustainability' have nothing to do with the decommodification of food as a structural and radical process. If anything, transforming social and environmental 'values' into a price just reinforces it. Thinking in terms of commons and commoning helps us, therefore, to uncover false solutions that are coming from within the corporate food system and to reject ongoing attempts to co-opt the critiques that go to the heart of the capitalist food system.

Equally noteworthy is the risk behind the multiplication in the use of the 'commons' terminology in the framework of food systems studies and sustainability initiatives. Although we are pleased to see that the two 'worlds' of the commons and food have been increasingly converging in the last years, our concerns are twofold. On the one hand, the incremental use of the 'commons' makes us think of a sentence that Stefano Rodotá (2013), a founding figure in the contemporary studies of the commons, used to pronounce: 'if everything is a commons nothing is a commons'. On the other hand, we are also moved by the realization that the radical and transformative power of the 'commons' may be lost when the notion is utilized to describe situations and projects that lack the holistic character of the commons and/or are compatible with the commodification of nature and labour.

The terminology 'food as a commons' made it both to the space of the UN FSS Pre-Summit and the People's Summit that was organized in response and reaction to the United Nations Food Systems Summit. Although it did not appear on the title of any presentation or panel during the Pre-Summit, it was mentioned by Sandrine Dixson-Declève of the Club to Rome during the 'agroecology' panel. More significantly, the notion of 'food as a commons' appeared on the agenda of the counter-mobilization organized by the People's Autonomous Response to the UN Food Systems Summit, where a whole session was organized around the theme of universal access to food, food as a public good, a right and a commons. This marked a significant achievement for the 'food commoners' and their attempt to bridge the gap between the vocabulary and paradigm of the commons and those that are more often adopted by peasants' organizations, Indigenous people and civil society.

In both contexts, the idea that food is a commons was used to talk about the provision of universal access to nutritious and adequate food for impoverished people as a way to enrich the understanding of human rights and facilitate their fulfilment. Commons, in this sense, means guaranteeing universal access to food, a goal that any food system should be achieving and that—unfortunately—is still out of sight. Commons is thus assimilated into the noble goal of feeding the marginalized and with the zero hunger objective of Sustainable Development Goal 2. In this way, it loses its holistic, radical and decommodifying character that makes it different—although compatible and complementary—with the idea of food as a public good[5] or food as right.[6] We thus welcome the diffusion of the term and the reflections that it inspires, but we also recognize the risk that commons and commodity, commons and capitalism, commons and the

[4] UN-FSS Pre-Summit talk 'Ensuring No One Is Left Behind: Equitable Livelihood in Food Systems' or 'Private Sector Priorities at the UN Food Systems Pre-Summit'.

[5] According to the Oxford dictionary, public good means a 'commodity or service that is provided without profit to all members of a society, either by the government or by a private individual or organization' (REF).

[6] We refer here to the mainstream interpretation of the right to food as the right that is realized when 'every man, woman and child, alone or in community with others, has the physical and economic access at all times to adequate food or means for its procurement' (CESCR 1999). A transformative interpretation of the right to food, in particular the one that has been developed by the most recent UN Special Rapporteurs on the Right to Food (De Schutter, Elver and Fakhri), is rooted in the idea that the corporate food system is incompatible with the international obligations assumed by states and that a radical transformation of the food systems is needed, first of all by removing food and agricultural products from the rules of the World Trade Organization that treat them almost as any other commodity.

corporate forms are made to coexist, while they are inherently incompatible.

As we discussed above, thinking about commons and a commons-based food system cannot only be about guaranteeing provision and access. It is a paradigm that requires a change in the entirety of the ecological relationships that constitute food systems and that are constituted by them. There can be no commons, we claim, if the food that is distributed is not embedded in a decommodified set of relationships where labour and nature are not considered as goods and services that can be appropriated and exchanged on the basis of a 'market value'. There can be no commons if seeds, land, knowledge and all the other components of the food system are privatized, owned and made exclusionary. We cannot talk about commons if we do not address the historical roots of tcontemporary food systems, and if we do not uphold the relational and cultural component of food systems as much more than receiving food from a benevolent state or food charity.

Universal access does not compensate for a chain based on alienation, extraction, depletion, exclusion and accumulation. Similarly, there can be no commons when food policies, like universal access to food, are not integrated with social policies that address the root causes of the state of impoverishment and the inequality in which it is embedded. Commons should not be reduced to charity or feeding because it is about recognizing the intrinsic interrelation between humans, nature and food, and the fact that food is life in itself, essential to other species' life. Non-systemic approaches either risk curtailing the transformative potential of commons as liberation and decommodification or—in the worst case scenario—aim to co-opt them and continue the subordination of the commons to the capitalist way of seeing food systems.

Conclusions

The UN Food Systems Summit has triggered a level of counter-mobilization among food activists that had not been witnessed since the opposition to the World Trade Organization and the Agreement on Agriculture. From all continents, calls and actions have been organized to reject corporate capture, the illegitimate nature of the Summit and the proposal of an IPCC for food (Clapp et al. 2021), the epistemic violence hidden behind the 'scientific agenda' and the intensification of quick-fix solutions rather than addressing the structural and systemic nature of inequalities, ecological degradation and food poverty. Slowly, cracks have been opened in the sandcastle of the Summit: renowned organizations like IPES-Food withdrew, media started paying more attention to the counter-Summit than the Summit itself, and key figures in the UN infrastructure recognized the need for structural reflections and paradigmatic shifts.

With this contribution, our intention is to enlarge these cracks by highlighting the common thread that connects the fights against corporations' power, the opposition to quick technological fixes, the struggles against the exploitation of workers and nature, the pathways towards food sovereignty and the emancipation of Indigenous communities, peasants, women and people of color from the yokes of colonialism, patriarchy and racism, and the journeys towards just, equitable and ecological food systems. We reject the idea of food as a commodity and the constant commodification of food systems through their fragmentation into components that are bought, deprived of their social, cultural and ecological connotations, and traded like any other good or service.

If we agree on the fact that food is an essential component of life and a central element in the interactions between living beings, we thus agree on the need to liberate it from the possibility of being reduced to a (cheap) price as an expression of cheap monetary exchanges. Moreover, we should agree on the incompatibility between a decommodified understanding of food and the unlimited accumulation of resources by a few corporations. Calling for the decommodification of food and food systems means, therefore, calling for the dismantlement of corporate power and the corporate form, for food democracy, for just and equitable territorial markets that are situated and respectful of the needs of people and planet, for agroecology as a culturally rooted and politically defined interdependence of humans, food and the rest of the ecosystem, and for the recognition of strong obligations of public actors to protect, respect and fulfill the right to food as the right of every individual to have the means to access healthy, adequate, culturally acceptable and sustainably produced food with dignity.

If decommodification is a space of convergence for the multiplicity of visions that oppose the UNFSS and the corporate food system, the notions of food as a commons, commons-based food systems and commoning the food systems can provide useful tools to strengthen this convergence. These terms are increasingly present in academic literature and have received multiple interpretations. Our understanding of commons is that they are inclusive socio-ecological systems inspired by anti-capitalist, anti-colonialist, anti-militarist, feminist, democratic and pluriversal conception of food systems and all their material and immaterial components. The lenses of commons and commoning allow us to recognize that the industrial agri-food system is rooted in the enclosure and appropriation of the capacity of living and non-living beings to reproduce and regenerate themselves, and subordinate them to profit and accumulation. As that, commons and commoning are radically transformative and incompatible with the commodification that is core to the capitalist agri-food system.

We are thus pleased to see that decommodification and the vocabulary of the commons made it to the counter-mobilizations and the UNFSS. However, all that is commons does not glitter. We must remain attentive to the risk of cooptation of radical concepts into yet another argument supporting food commodification. Pricing the multiple values of food has nothing to do with a liberating food commons. For the CEO of PepsiCo, decommodification is a higher price for socially and environmentally sustainable food. For UN Secretary General Guterres, decommodification is about internalization of externalities and having food actors pay for them. Thus, commons become just opportunities to manage nature, to produce ecosystem services and capture carbon, or to promote universal access to food for people in poverty, without challenging the construction of the food chain nor the root causes of marginalization and the perverse effect of dependency on donations and food banks. Upending and throwing out this logic allows commons and commoning to be pathways to liberation, the fulfillment of multiple human rights and the re-integration of humans into the web of life.

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