Beacham, J., & Willatt, A. (2020). New foodscapes. In M. Parker (Ed.), *Life After COVID-19: The Other Side of Crisis* (pp. 73-82). University of Bristol Press. https://bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/life-after-covid-19

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New foodscapes

Jonathan Beacham and Alice Willatt

In light of the far-reaching consequences of the pandemic, there are few areas of social and economic life around the world which have been as profoundly affected as the foodscape.[1] As Peter Jackson (2015) notes, contemporarily food has become an increasingly potent source of anxiety and worry for many. Yet the early days of the crisis played host to a more fundamental threat of the food supply collapsing, or unravelling, in its entirety. Images of these fears playing out on the ground became hallmarks of the emergence of the crisis, with shoppers stockpiling household essentials and 'vulnerable' customers browsing desolate aisles widely circulated through media platforms. Whilst these fears have largely abated as supply chains have stabilised, the fallout of the pandemic seems likely to further economic hardship, which in turn appears likely to deepen the UK hunger crisis that has been fuelled by more than a decade of pernicious austerity measures following the global financial crisis of 2007-8. As three million British people report going hungry in the first three weeks of the lockdown (Loopstra, 2020), foodbanks have struggled to manage demand whilst neighbourhoods up and down the country have established informal emergency food provisioning networks.

In this capacity, the crisis has brought into sharp relief many ills of the current foodscape. We might ask how neoliberal governance has conditioned foodscapes by continuing to displace the responsibilities of the state on to the charitable sector. We might question how we have come to treat that most intimate of commodities that sustains us as if it were not somehow distinctly different from other commodities. Relatedly, we might also ask why much of the world now relies upon on a handful of powerful corporations—which exist by legal definition to deliver profit to shareholders—to supply populations with the nourishment they require. Further, these ubiquitous images of empty shelves raises questions around the supposed 'flexibility' underpinning the complex supply chains that bring food from disparate geographical contexts to supermarket shelves 'as if by magic'. Ultimately, it has raised innumerable questions around how we understand our current juncture and what foodscapes 'after Covid' might be like.

With these spurs in mind, our interest in this chapter rests upon understanding food as something much broader in its scope than merely providing nourishment. Conversely, food connects members of societies together in numerous ways through a wide range of provisioning practices with attendant political-economic and organisational dynamics. As Goodman (2016) puts it, food is always 'more-than-food' in that food is always *more than* the role that it plays in purely biological processes. Taking stock of the diverse ways in which more-than-food might be differently provisioned, we argue that the crisis cannot be neatly disentangled from the problems associated with an increasingly corporatised foodscape in recent decades. Yet amongst the wider fallout, the crisis has unintentionally revealed glimmers of different ways of organising foodscapes that potentially offer better outcomes than the corporatised status quo. Before we begin to articulate this narrative, we delve a little deeper into the making of the contemporary 'food regime'.

The corporate food regime

For the political economy perspective of Friedmann and McMichael (1989), the 1970s onwards represented an epochal turning point that led to growing corporate power in the food system. A general trend of trade liberalisation, combined with paradigmatic shifts towards the primacy of 'free markets' has concentrated power within the foodscape in the hands of ever fewer transnational agri-businesses. The negative consequences of this food regime have been profound. In producing historically cheap food through supply chains that crisscross the planet, a wide range of externalities have been pushed onto those—both human and non-human—least able to absorb them (Patel and Moore, 2017). Importantly, these historical shifts in agri-food in recent decades have not only influenced the emergence of the pandemic in the first place, but these shifts have concurrently created a perfect storm for responding to crises such as Covid.

Yet the internal contradictions of the corporate food regime have long been evident prior to the pandemic. The negative impacts of the corporate food regime on public health are now widely acknowledged, and countries such as the UK have seen food insecurity accelerate drastically in recent years. Given a general historical trend of the state withdrawing from interfering in the 'free markets' that have allowed the corporate food regime to manifest, resistance to this regime now derives from a wide range of NGOs, civil society initiatives and social movements. These spaces not only illuminate growing discontent within this status quo, but are also where we might pin our hopes for better foodscapes.

The politics of possibility

To achieve this, we need to find ways of thinking that encourage us to look beyond the concentrated power of the corporate food regime in order to recognise the ways in which this crisis has accelerated these contradictions and rendered them increasingly visible. Equally, we must look beyond the state for easy solutions given a widespread ideological unwillingness of governments to put into practice measures that might alleviate food insecurity. In doing so, we direct our attention towards a range of organisational models that show how dominant capitalistic framings of food might be disrupted and questioned (Gibson-Graham, 2008). Even within our locales from which we write, the crisis has revealed a wide range of civil society initiatives from the 'bottom up' which—by their very existence—encourage us to diversify the story surrounding what might be possible.

We begin with commercial considerations, though one that might be telling in terms of empowering local economies in ways that are not engendered by the corporate food regime and its valorising tendencies. A survey undertaken by the Food Foundation (Wheeler, 2020) has shown how veg boxes and direct-to-door delivery schemes across the UK have increased sales by an average of 111% from the end of February to mid-April. Many of these schemes have subsequently been forced to restrict orders to manage demand, often with lengthy waiting lists. Given demand that is not being met, we suggest that this predicament reveals one of the ways in which local economies might be empowered after Covid by taking a stronger role in food provisioning. This, in turn, relates to changing ways in which we might grow food, which we return to briefly later.

These rapid shifts in the foodscape have also manifested in arguably more intriguing ways. Notably, a plethora of 'mutual aid' networks have cropped up around the world. Facilitated primarily through social media platforms, these networks aim to provide support, initiating different practices of care for those who might struggle to access basic necessities. As we have seen within our own neighbourhoods, the sourcing and distribution of food through these networks has been central to their operation. We also note the ways in which the logic of scarcity underpinning many of our market-driven relations with food came to be inverted. For example, supermarket delivery services, which until the crisis have tended to represent a small percentage of retail sales, have come to represent a point of contention as corporates have been unable to meet elevated demand. Within these networks, informal collaborative arrangements have become commonplace, with offers to group together within the supermarket delivery slots that members had secured. With these small gestures, the sovereign and individualised 'consumer' concerned with meeting only their needs fades away. Elsewhere, we have happily been involved in offers of sharing surplus food or produce gathered from allotments and gardens, revealing an underlying ethic of care and generosity towards others involved in these networks.

Other areas of the foodscape have seen their operations reconfigured in unforeseen ways. The Bristol Food Union notes on its website that within the space of two weeks post-lockdown commercial kitchens across this English city had been repurposed to feed over 700 homeless and vulnerable citizens daily, alongside feeding frontline staff in the emergency services and social care system. This is emblematic of initiatives in other geographical locations, such as the triple Michelin starred restaurant in New York City now serving food to thousands in need every day.

Though our analysis of these shifts is limited and piecemeal given their 'in process' nature, they reveal the ways in which our collective practices around food can rapidly change. Though we ought not uncritically celebrate these as automatically good, we suggest that they point to the diversity of practices within foodscapes, both in terms of how they are constrained by neoliberal rationality but also open to other ways of being and becoming. Whilst these initiatives don't represent fully-fledged alternatives to the dominant models of market-based food provisioning, we remain spurred by their emergence. Whilst the organisations we mention may be understood as conservative manifestations of the 'Big Society'—informal, charitable relations that reaffirm the status quo—by encouraging other readings we here advocate for another conceptualisation of civil society. Far from something wholly withered, these initiatives point to the generative capacity of civil society, which times of crisis have clarified and brought to the fore in ways that might otherwise have been inconceivable. Yet the question remains as to how this more radical spirit of mutual aid is retained within these initiatives in foodscapes after Covid, and they are not institutionalised into a landscape of (nonetheless laudable) charitable efforts.

To develop this perspective, we suggest that examining the case of a community kitchen that emerged prior to the crisis provides important insights.

Lessons from the community kitchen

The community kitchen in question is organised by a team of volunteers who deliver weekly community meals made from surplus food collected from local stores and supermarkets. It operates from a community centre in a deprived neighbourhood, providing hot meals and food donation boxes to vulnerable members of society. With Covid, they have shifted to redistributing surplus food parcels in surrounding neighbourhoods. The second author was engaged in a co-produced research project with the community kitchen, which opened inquiry into the tensions and challenges that arose in this space. While a comprehensive overview of this research is beyond this chapter, we offer a brief reflection on the complex negotiations that take place in the day-to-day doing of care in emergency food provisioning spaces. In so doing, we illuminate the importance of cultivating ethical deliberation on how efforts to address food insecurity are simultaneously constrained by a market logic, but also open and available to alternative possibilities. We suggest that these spaces open a politics of possibility for building a more socially just and sustainable foodscapes after Covid.

In keeping with current readings of emergency food provisioning spaces (Cloke et al., 2017), in one sense the community kitchen operates through a paternalistic model of charity that risks co-option by neoliberalism. Furthermore, while the community are repurposing food 'waste', the supermarkets they are partnered with accrue benefits through Corporate Social Responsibility agendas, diverting attention away from the unsustainable practices that perpetuate waste in the first place. However, the research also casts light on volunteers' efforts to constructively engage with these tensions by opening spaces of deliberative reflection in day-to-day doings of care, at the end of a kitchen shift or during team meetings. These moments often opened reflective deliberation on the intrinsic value and worth of such a project. Is the community kitchen just a 'sticking plaster' response to social and environmental crises? Can it evolve into something more transformational? To what extent do volunteers embody an ethic of solidarity, standing *with* rather than *for* individuals who are marginalised and excluded?

As responses to Covid from civil society grow and attempt to sustain themselves in light of the spike of food insecurity, a key dimension of these endeavours lies in negotiating what it means to care in times of crisis. Reflecting on first-hand accounts of individuals experiencing hunger due to benefit sanctions led two participants to participate, for the first time, in direct action against government austerity measures. Ongoing deliberation about the creeping appropriation of food banks and community kitchens into the aforementioned 'Big Society' agenda of the government at that time, through a succession of public visits from politicians, prompted other volunteers to engage in advocacy. One volunteer wrote a blog post reflecting on research that identified a correlation between austerity policies and a growth in food bank use, which resonated with the increasing number of families attending the community kitchen. These examples elucidate the importance of reflection and learning for shaping what it means to care, in this case contributing to the extension of care beyond service provision to encompass action for radical systemic change.

While this offers insight into how deliberation can help us make sense of what it means to care for those made vulnerable by this pandemic, it remains important to acknowledge that care is a complex and contested terrain. While we have pointed towards the progressive

potential of such initiatives, we recognise how the white, middle-class volunteers at the community kitchen, and potentially other newly emerging mutual aid networks, can affirm dominant power relations by casting those experiencing food insecurity as passive recipients of care. Such tensions underscore the need for collective reflection around how best to respond to the unfolding crises connected to the pandemic, not only to meet individual needs in the here-and-now, but also in seeking social transformation to build a more socially just foodscape.

Towards a deliberative ethic

Lessons from the community kitchen reveal the need for deliberation. Despite the seductive power of techno-scientific 'fixes' for our troubles, a more modest transformation in our foodscapes might emerge from thinking about the voices that are heard in these debates and the ways in which narratives can be retold from different perspectives. As we have shown here, foodscapes can look very different when we focus on the social relations that food might foster between people.

The power of corporates in our contemporary food regime encourages us to think of our agency as 'consumers' first and foremost, 'shopping with our feet' by making narrow and largely asinine choices between corporates. As an important example of the ways in which these deliberative spaces might be opened up, the National Food Strategy review—one of the first substantial reviews of agri-food in the UK in decades—was launched prior to the crisis. The first author participated in one of the public consultations in the north west of England, where approximately 40 citizens were invited to explore food in their lives. We think that this model of 'citizens' assemblies' is important in broadening the scope of voices that are heard, and as Rebecca Willis has suggested with reference to climate:

> Deliberation won't, in and of itself, solve the climate crisis. We need far-reaching action, which will require radical policy, and confrontation of vested interests. But this policy and action will only be achievable if people understand and support it. The more we find out about how to build a public mandate for climate action, and the more we include people in genuine debate and deliberation, the more likely we are to find a way through. (Willis, 2019: para. 7)

If foodscapes after Covid are to be better, they require new ways of thinking, understanding and narrating our experiences.

Conclusion

In speculatively exploring foodscapes after Covid, we need not choose between returning to the status quo prior to the crisis nor predicting the grim intensification of corporate capitalism's stranglehold. Understood as more-than-food, food touches upon so much more than what we eat to sustain ourselves—it is fundamental to the ways in which we understand and relate to one another. Our task is to tell stories that simultaneously recognise corporate power and its ills in the foodscape without totalising it or casting it as inescapable. We must also resist the tendency to read emergent and possibly more positive

formations as merely embroiled within restoring the status quo but instead as radically probing the terrain of what might be possible.

The limited space we have here necessarily constrains us. A fuller perspective may give more credence to the politics of knowledge and the way in which our daily routines shape (and often limit) our experiences of the foodscape. Equally, we have barely touched upon the ways in which food might be produced differently—for example in growing interest in urban agriculture and 'guerrilla gardening', signalling a resurgence of the utopian underpinnings of 'garden cities'. Nonetheless, the crisis has generated glimmers of possibly better ways of doing things. Without wishing to downplay the struggles involved in bringing about better foodscapes, amidst Covid's upheaval we must become more open to "to what can be learned from what is happening on the ground" in "read[ing] the potentially positive futures barely visible in the order of things" (Gibson-Graham and Roelvink, 2010: 342).

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[1] We prefer to think of food 'scapes' in order to avoid the mechanistic connotations of food 'systems'.