

Food Studies and the Pitfalls of Interdisciplinarity

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Preamble

Much of my work on food has focused on how it is spoken about and discursively constructed - both in everyday discourses as well as in specialised knowledge in the academy. This paper critically focuses on the conceptual and theoretical frames that dominate influential strands in food studies. It goes on to make a case for neglected areas within critical transdisciplinary (rather than “interdisciplinary”) food studies that emerge out of humanities work.

Three questions will be explored:

- Despite claims about interdisciplinarity, how do dominant models of food studies reinforce familiar sites and forms of research?
- Which disciplines are privileged and how does this buttress a global neoliberal knowledge economy and dominant western-centric epistemologies?
- How can attention to “affect” and transdisciplinarity enrich food studies?

Introduction

Much has been said (including statements and discussions at this conference) about the value of interdisciplinarity in food studies. Food studies is often seen to straddle disciplines in ways that encourage epistemological innovation; in other words the interdisciplinarity of food studies is believed to generate fresh perspectives on our everyday world and broader social and political issues. Interdisciplinary food studies often involve connections among disciplines. But much of it does not really generate new epistemological work.

In the contexts whose work I am familiar with – Africa, India, the United States, cross-disciplinary research and writing often involves consolidating neoliberal paradigms and reinforcing post-enlightenment ideas about logic and reason that privilege, amongst other things, western-centric science, positivist arguments and methodologies, and singular and linear explanations and solutions.

I'm presenting my overall argument very bluntly here, so bear with me as I outline my reasons for saying this.

What has the “interdisciplinarity” of food studies really involved?

In starting this outline, it's useful to assess what the main interdisciplinary conversations in food studies have actually entailed. In the global South and the North, *certain* disciplines in the social sciences and STEM fields, such as politics, economics, sociology, public health and sociology, agro-science, horticultural science, dietetics and human nutrition have been mobilised – in the form of joint projects or individual researchers drawing on these - to consolidate work under the umbrella of **food security**. Increasingly, it seems, commerce and business administration have been playing an increasingly influential role. The combination of research connecting certain social science traditions, STEM fields and commerce often prioritises certain methodologies, such as quantitative research and statistical analysis. With the growing influence of commerce and business administration in food studies, it seems that marketing and its associated methodologies and strategies is having an increasing impact. Despite the seeming attention to fields like human geography or anthropology, the positivist assumptions of *leading* disciplines end up being prioritised in seemingly interdisciplinary work on food. This kind of work is often considered scientific, socially relevant and, as we know, often generates large amounts of university and state funding.

Food security work *does* vary theoretically, and scholars have come up with wide-ranging recommendations – including addressing government policies, changing development practice or instituting small-scale and community-driven empowerment projects. But the work seems to be unified in terms of its political

effects. Alcock persuasively critiques these by tracing the history of food security discourse. Showing that it is the “primary cognitive lens through which the complexity and prevalence of global hunger is viewed” (Alcock, 2013), he deals with its origins as a technology of governance institutionalised by the United Nations (UN) and, more broadly, the agendas of corporate global capitalism. Alcock’s discourse analysis of food security encourages us to see that “food security” is not a transparent term that “captures” objectively measurable social and human experiences; rather, it actively constitutes our understanding of such experiences. It conjures up a sense of urgency to legitimise an arsenal of material resources, vocabularies, skills and institutions to address far-reaching socio-economic problems. It is therefore unsurprising that food security work has marshaled considerable support from governments, international donors and Northern governments.

Since the second half of the 1900s, and within the context of growing technologies and discourses of development, food security policy, research and practice has steadily garnered donor support through government funding, North to South aid, UN mechanisms, and foreign policy. Alongside this, various technologies, courses, projects, experts and paradigms have been harnessed to address the pressing problem of global hunger and “food insecurity” for the majority of the world’s population.

Globally, the expansion of food security expertise to address world food problems has been striking, and it is clear that this work has constituted an industry in itself. In 2014, a *google* search of food security institutions yielded 73 300 000 results, with these including non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and non-profit organisations (NPOs) in the North and the South, summer schools and institutes for training experts and field workers and a vast body of literature focusing on the immediate problems of the “food insecure”. This work often uses extremely brittle technical strategies for solving these problems. Consequently, much of the work does not engage with, for example, the work of scholars such as the Guyanese historian Walter Rodney (1973), whose pathbreaking exploration of the “development of underdevelopment” remains an acute

explanation of the origins of (and guides towards the solutions to) widespread hunger and deprivation among many alongside excess and over-abundance among a few.

Limits of food Sovereignty as an epistemological break

The left-leaning work on food has been very critical of food security models. Work on food justice and food sovereignty highlights global and national forms of economic and political power in considering how food is produced, distributed and consumed. It therefore breaks away from the tendency to neutralise the prevalence of hunger and food shortages among certain groups, and is concerned with addressing the *causes*, rather than the *effects* of the world's food problems. In other words, hunger ceases to be seen as an objective fact that needs intervention, and is problematised as the economic and political consequence of exploitation and oppression.

But even food sovereignty and food justice paradigms draw selectively on certain interdisciplinary configurations. So for example, scholars or research projects combine politics, economics, human geography, anthropology and sociology in their research on topics such as agrarian struggles, labour exploitation or livelihood struggles. This disciplinary clustering often repeats the pitfalls of positivist research.

This includes:

- privileging the voice and vantage point of the researcher, so that the agencies and subjectivities of communities and the objects of research end up being drowned out or ignored.

A related problem is that it has little time for nuance and ambivalence. Because it is often so directly concerned with problem solving, ambiguities that are inevitably crucial to thinking about social solutions end up being neglected. The results are often dogmatic assertions about, for example, how to create food sovereignty campaigns, or orchestrate equitable and just methods of land allocation or sustainable food production. But there is very little attention to the

micro-level struggles that may interfere with or constrain these largely abstract ideals. Even more importantly, there is little space to consider whether these ideals are in fact ideals for those they are intended to serve.

A related seriously neglected dimension in food sovereignty and food justice work is an attention to social subjects as human subjects. In other words, the kinds of explorations, theorising and methodological work that is often associated with the humanities, literary and cultural studies, philosophy, history and certain strands of anthropology and human geography is often absent.

This is where my own current interest lies. I want to go on now to identify what seems to me an especially important strand in humanities-driven food studies. I have been finding this work mainly in the research of feminists such as Elizabeth Grosz and Jane Bennett. Revealingly, this kind of scholarship is often regarded as unscientific, fluffy, vague or abstract in comparison with the so-called “scientific rigour” of the models I’ve referred to. Yet it has the potential to deepen many conversations about food, especially in its attention to what humanities scholars have been exploring as “affect”.

“Affect” in transdisciplinary food studies

The abundance of theory on affect in the humanities deals with the body, the everyday, relationality, cognition, and emotion. This theory has also had important epistemological implications and has, for example, responded critically to entrenched subject-object dichotomies in research, the conceptual binaries that (most) natural and (many) social scientists often work with – such as the mind versus the body, or the body versus matter. One intervention that interests me especially is the way that theorising affect complicates the tendency to privilege the **physiological** body through scientific knowledge in the form of, for example, medicine, biology, dietetics, nutritional health, public health and so on.

One explicit way that affect can be introduced to complicate ideas about food and the human is offered by Amartya Sen’s work on poverty and shame. Showing

that poverty is stigmatised and linked to social and personal attitudes, he argues that being poor is always socially coded. Hunger can be seen in very similar ways. The hungry often experience shame, with welfarist models and narratives (often, food security and even food sovereignty paradigms as well) about their salvation often compounding, rather than addressing the problem of human hunger in a holistic way. Hunger from a humanist perspective would obviously embrace questions of dignity and emotional well-being, and the physical act of “being fed” does not begin to touch this.

Thinking about the constructedness of hunger should of course not blind us to the realities of injustice and deprivation. At the same time, defining hunger in narrowly positivist terms, and in terms that focus only on the physiological body can impoverish our understanding.

Interestingly it is mainly within literary studies or psychology that ‘hunger’ is understood in ways that transcend physiological need. Sarah Sceats’ work on women’s writing, for example, deals with Doris Lessing, Margaret Atwood and Angela Carter to demonstrate how fictional representations of food cravings and eating signal certain women’s existential responses to social experiences. In Anita Desai’s novel, *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), the alienation of an Indian immigrant in the US is explored in relation to his struggles to eat well, while the daughter of the American family with whom he lives overeats compulsively as she experiences her own painful sense of alienation in a world obsessed with body image. So the novel intricately explores ways in which nationality, class, region, gender and race are webbed in the meanings and the circuits of food. These kinds of texts, and close reading of them reveal that our understanding of what food means to human beings is surely weakened by the assumption that affect is either not connected to real hunger, or that affect is of relatively peripheral importance in considering real hunger.

Theorising through affect can assist with exploring embodied subjects’ experiences of food and eating in ways that open up new ways of seeing conditions that we often take for granted. This does not entail valuing the

relevance of one academic discipline over another. Or the kind of interdisciplinarity where disciplines retain their original form even when they seem to be in conversation with one another. Or the kind of interdisciplinarity where one discipline dominates, even though other disciplines appear to be enlisted.

In conceptualising this reciprocal interaction among disciplines, I am indebted to the ideas of postcolonial feminists such as Chandra Mohanty. She argues that international feminism needs to be distinguished from transnational feminism. *International* connections lead to a situation where structurally dominant partners in networks confirm their authority in relationships forged with others. International feminism would therefore configure partnerships where, for example US-based feminists do not interrogate their privilege in relation to Indian, Latin American or South African feminists. Transnational feminism, in contrast, involves democratic interactions based on self-reflexiveness, with each partner reconfiguring themselves through interaction with others.

This has implications for using transdisciplinarity rather than interdisciplinarity. Transdisciplinarity therefore suggests a democratic model that seems to me to be sorely needed in developing substantively new epistemologies for thinking about food, the environment and human subjects.