Fast Food Sovereignty: Contradiction in Terms or Logical Next Step?

Louis Thiemann[1] · Antonio Roman-Alcalá[1]

Abstract

The growing academic literature on 'food sovereignty' has elaborated a food producer-driven vision of an alternative, more ecological food system rooted in greater democratic control over food production and distribution. Given that the food sovereignty developed with and within producer associations, a rural setting and production-side concerns have overshadowed issues of distribution and urban consumption. Yet, ideal types such as direct marketing, time-intensive food preparation and the 'family shared meal' are hard to transcribe into the life realities in many non-rural, non-farming households, and it is unclear, in turn, how such realities can fit into models of food sovereignty. A particular practical and research gap exists in how to engage the overwhelming need for food options served under time constraints and (often) outside of the home or a full-service restaurant. The over-generalized vilification of 'fast food' should be replaced by a framework that allows us to distinguish between unhealthy, corporate fast foods and both traditional and emerging alternatives that can serve to extend the tenets of food sovereignty further into food processing, distribution and consumption. This article analyzes existing conceptualizations of fast food, explores fast food historically, and studies how food sovereignty can operationalize its tenets and priorities in situations where fast food is an unquestionable necessity.

Keywords Nutrition · Slow food · Corporate food · Rural–urban linkages · Food justice · Nested markets

Introduction: Fast Food and Food Sovereignty

Food sovereignty (hereafter: FS) emerged as a radical framework for agrarian development that links concerns over agriculture's worsening ecological impacts, opposition to the commodification of natural resources and concentration of land

✉ Louis Thiemann
lthiemann@iss.nl

[1] International Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, The Netherlands

ownership and power in value chains, as well as the preservation and reinvigoration of rural cultures. It originated in the debates between representatives of the 31 peasant movements that signed La Via Campesina's first joint declaration in Mons, Belgium, in 1993, where it served as a conceptual tool to integrate experiences across borders and national contexts and a 'rallying cry' in the formulation of possible futures (Rosset 2003; Wittman 2009). Since then, movements and concerns from various sectors have been amalgamated with this small farmer-base: rural indigenous cultures, landless workers in agri-food chains, as well as urban food justice movements in the North (Grey and Patel 2015; Holt-Giménez et al. 2011). Recently, academic authors as well as movement actors have further sought to 'scale out' the FS framework to include alternative forms of international trade in agricultural goods, non-traditional 're-peasantization' in the North, the potential of public procurement programs such as those developed by Brazil's *Partido dos Trabalhadores* governments since 2002, and the social processes around urban farming (Burnett and Murphy 2014; van der Ploeg 2013; Wittman and Blesh 2017; Roman-Alcalá 2015; Thiemann 2015).

As part of this 'scaling out' process, our premise is that FS advocates and analysts should seek to address more directly questions of how food is distributed, processed and prepared. We focus here on one particular issue that has so far been spared out of discussions: the necessity for pre-prepared foods consumed outside of the home, in other words, the need for *fast foods* (hereafter: FF) that are, to borrow Slow Food's maxim, 'good, clean and fair' and fit within the conceptual framework of FS. Because FF is often framed as a new phenomenon introduced by companies such as McDonalds as an integral part and parcel of the corporate/industrial food regime, FS movements and overlapping food movements tend to place it in intersectional dichotomies such as "fast food versus slow food, organic versus conventional, natural versus industrial" (Burch and Lawrence 2009: 268). In McMichael's anthology of the corporate food regime, FF is referred to as 'the global fast food industry', which "provides cheap and unhealthy convenience foods, based on the appropriation of home-cooking activities and knowledges" (2005: 288).

This dichotomy is particularly entrenched in the language around the Slow Food Movement which, so far, is the strongest foray of food movements into the realm of food processing and preparation, especially in Europe.[1] It presents unhurriedness, consideration and artisan skill as the 'gold standard' of food preparation labor both at home and in restaurants. Taking the fast-slow antagonism as the point of departure for food system transformation has fueled a re-emerging interest in slow food practices. It has, however, also led to disregard for alternatives *within* FF, as well as for FF solutions that solve deficiencies encountered in contemporary home and restaurant cooking. Imagining a food system that allows

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[1] The "Slow Food" movement defines itself in contrast to the pace and lack of agency implied in fast food: "We are enslaved by speed and have all succumbed to the same insidious virus: Fast Life. It disrupts which our habits, pervades the privacy of our homes and forces us to eat Fast Food. To be worthy of the name, homo sapiens should rid themselves of speed […]". Slow Food International defines its philosophy as "a way of saying no to the rise of fast food and fast life […] living an unhurried life, taking time to enjoy simple pleasures" (Slow Food 1989).

people access to 'good, clean, fair' food does not require a parochial vision of food preparation as procuring raw ingredients, preparing them without shortcuts, and eating ceremoniously around a dinner or restaurant table.

Unquestionably, many channels for FF preparation and consumption—especially in neo-liberal economies such the United States—emerged in complicity with the corporate food regime. But does this mean that the whole idea of FF should be 'thrown out with the bathwater'? Is there a role for FF production and consumption in 'food sovereign' channels of food distribution, processing and consumption? And, conversely, does the "right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods" entail a 'right' of individuals to, under certain conditions, find or prepare such food 'on the go' (World Forum on Food Sovereignty 2007)?

To answer these questions, we start by analyzing the prevalent definitions of FF on whose base it became the 'Anti-Christ' of the food system, and offer a more neutral definition that allows FS proponents to systematically consider different kinds of FF in the context of FS advocacy. We feel that the 'FF equals bad food' view, predominant in contemporary food movements and scholarship, is identifying the context (*corporate* control over FF options) as the thing itself. What we propose is to reconsider FF inclusively and in its purest sense: *food that is prepared under (externally or self-imposed, 'justified' or 'unjustified') time constraints, either by the person eating, or by a specialized food worker*. Such a definition allows the term FF itself to act as a platform for urgently needed comparisons between different FF options. By rehabilitating the concept of FF, we can begin asking the pertinent questions: what are the labor standards in different FF structures; what are the linkages they have formed with producers and intermediaries; are they based on corporate or horizontal forms of organization; and of course: are they healthy? With this in mind, we show that FF encompasses an extensive history, diversity of options, and variety of management styles, much of it beyond the reach of the corporate food regime.

Provoking a fresh look at 'FF sovereignty' connects a number of issues being debated in food systems literature: the role of the food-preparation (i.e. restaurant, slaughterhouse, warehouse) worker as a potential mirror of, or contrast to, the realities of work on small farms; the economics of food consumption and exchange; the unavoidable relationships (within capitalist economies) between food prices and the value and position of labor inside the food system (Woodhouse 2010) and outside it (Bernstein 2014); and the 'time-crunch' of modernity (Petrini 2003). It adapts important questions of agrarian studies, such as the Chayanovian line between utility and drudgery (applied to food preparation labor in the household), and the ambivalent effects of the semi-proletarianization on the peasantry (van der Ploeg 2013: 38–41; Hann 1987). What to make of the fact that modern peasants hold off-farm jobs in order to pay for, among other things, convenient prepared/processed foods, in addition to foods from the farm and garden? Finally, is the prevalence of fast(er) foods necessarily reliant on a consolidation of agricultural production into industrial and/or corporate units, corresponding with de-peasantization? These questions form the wider background of our discussion of FF.

The Anti-Christ of the Food System? Common Conceptualizations of Fast Food

There is no commonly accepted definition of FF. Studies about its impact on nutrition, gastronomy and agricultural value chains have relied on a wide variety of working definitions that often project elements of a particular national reality, as well as assumptions and attitudes towards the matter. This has turned FF into a very much *political* concept where attempts to define a wider phenomenon and attempts to oppose a series of specific incarnations are intertwined. In nutrition studies, "[at] present, there is no agreed upon definition of 'fast food' for research purposes, and other investigators interested in this question [the nutritional impact of FF] have often used all restaurants in analyses rather than 'fast food' due to this uncertainty" (Jeffery et al. 2006: 2).

Another tendency, especially in studies based in the United States (US), is to simply apply the popular definition common in that country, which is fundamentally based on the *brand* rather than the type of food. Block et al. (2004) "defined fast-food restaurants as *chain restaurants* that have two or more of the following characteristics: expedited food service, takeout business, limited or no wait staff, and payment tendered prior to receiving food" (emphasis added). This narrow definition proposes that FF *must* be corporate, i.e. it can only be sold by corporations that create a standardized offer, replicated in a large number of establishments regardless of local cultures or suppliers. Corporatized FF systems, however, are not the norm worldwide, nor are they leading across the so-called developed world. In most European countries, FF cultures are primarily built around small family businesses, most of them with an immigrant background, while corporate FF represents a significant minority in revenue. In Germany, the 16.000 Turkish and Kurdish FF bistros alone made 4 billion € in annual sales in small, family-knit labor units averaging 3.75 workers (ATDiD 2012). This and other non-corporate FF sub-sectors were responsible for 55.2% of FF sales in 2017 (calculated on the basis of DEHOGA 2018: 3–4; BVE 2018: 33). Other studies have recognized this problem, admitting that "there is […] no consensus definition for a fast food restaurant that has been applied in health research", and that "[o]ther sources of high-energy, low-nutrient density, prepared foods (especially snack foods) are available in venues other than those typically thought of as fast-food restaurants" (Burdette and Whitaker 2004).[2]

Intriguing is the tendency in health/nutrition studies—which perhaps intend a priori to show the detrimental health effects of FF—to make (and document) choices to exclude healthier alternative FFs from their sample. Dunn (2010: 1153) write that "An important decision is to define what establishments to categorize as fast-food restaurants. One possible definition relies on the County Business Patterns program (CBP), in which fast-food restaurants fall under category … as 'Limited Service Restaurants.' But this definition suffers an important disadvantage: it is simply too broad, including establishments like delicatessens and bagel stores"—which could

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[2] Fleischhacker et al. (2011) provide an overview of definitions of fast food in nutrition studies, which are all similar to those three above.

threaten the study's desired outcome. In a US-Canada comparative study, the authors note that "[t]he differences observed [in FF health outcomes] also need to be evaluated in the context of possible differences in the definition of "fast food" and "fast food restaurant" by consumers in the two countries", indicating that such differences of definition can be crucial when measuring the effects of FF (as a general category) on health, but potentially also on agriculture and labor (Kara et al. 1997). In Cuba, as well as most other developing countries, such studies would be confronted by a FF system based principally on street vending and *cafeterias*, small venues without seating, where both traditional (*criollo*), complete meals (imitating those prepared in the home or in full-service restaurants) are sold together with introduced FFs such as pizzas and hamburgers—both are sold in the same venue, under the same conditions, at roughly the same prices, and take roughly the same time to prepare and eat (Thiemann and Spoor 2019).

Powell et al. (2007) base their FF definition on the customer service experience in the respective venue, leading them to primarily distinguish between "fast food" and "full-service" restaurants. Another study followed this distinction, but also established a category of 'alternative FFs': "above all baguette, kebab, roasted foods, and grilled chicken that are offering alternatives to multi-national food service brands" (Kita and Hasan 2010).

Other studies have solved the problem by recurring to popular definitions of FF. In this regard, a look at the popular online encyclopedia Wikipedia offers what we consider to represent the most common *Western*/'Minority World' description of the matter:

> Fast food is the term given to food that is prepared and served very quickly, *first popularized in the 1950s in the United States.* […] typically the term refers to food sold in a restaurant or store with preheated or precooked ingredients, and served to the customer in a packaged form for take-out/take-away. Fast food restaurants are traditionally separated by their ability to serve food via a drive-through. (2018, emphasis added)

To consider that 'traditionally' FF is served at a drive-through means forgetting the long tradition of FF before and besides the corporate food system. It shows how a whole category of foods, different versions of which have existed for millennia, was given a specific name at the emergence of the corporate food system, a name that only refers to those FFs that are also corporate foods. Over time, this has squeezed all other FF realities out of our vocabulary.

In a study conducted by Dunn et al. (2008), however, Australian interview participants "were read a list of foods […] and asked to indicate which types they would categorise as fast food". The authors found that, despite the dominance of narrow definitions in political discourse, "most people were quite inclusive, stating that they believed the majority of foods on the list provided could be described as fast. Foods not categorised as fast (such as sandwiches and frozen

meals) shared either a lack of branding or a resemblance to foods that are more likely to be prepared in the home" (ibid: 331–332). Interestingly enough, the interviewer also measured how the prevalent definition of 'FF = unhealthy & for poor people' entered into participants' minds during the course of the interviews: "Although many participants were initially inclusive in their categorisation of fast foods, a different tendency emerged as soon as people answered subsequent questions requiring them to put fast food into a context. In those circumstances, people's spontaneous associations were with food that is high in fats, low in nutritional value, and purchased from large chains" (ibid: 332). The study went on to investigate the normative beliefs associated with the motion of defining FF, i.e. including or excluding certain foods and contexts from it in order to accord to a specific pre-conceived picture.

> "[T]hirty-six percent of participants referred to people who are overweight, poorly educated, or of lower socio-economic status as those who would probably approve of frequent fast-food consumption. Such beliefs suggest the existence of a stereotype of the fast-food consumer as a lesser individual, lacking in knowledge or self-control, and possibly driven by hedonistic or economic factors" (ibid: 333).

Interviewees were found to hold a "generally negative stereotype" about FF, in which a neutral definition is dropped in favor of one that allows distancing oneself from the lower classes; in other words, soliciting stereotypes of both FF and those who eat it. "It appears that participants believed that fast food is commonly consumed by those who are relatively naïve or easily tempted" (ibid). In a sense, thus, interviewees confronted with the problem of defining FF first thought of 'FF' simply as *fast* food, including a variety of food options, but only seconds later their prejudices and norms kicked in, 'hijacking' this definition towards arguments of class, decency, responsibility etc., and moving it from neutral description to highly normative interpretation.

Another notion frequently included in frameworks of 'FF' is the act of deferring food preparation labor to specialized food workers. We see good reasons not to include this factor in an inclusive definition of FF. It is implausible to distinguish categorically between, for example, a meal from a vendor's microwave (where the consumer stands around for 2 min waiting for the 'Bing') and the same meal prepared in the consumer's own microwave at home. To take another example, a traditional pasta recipe with olive oil and parmigiano and a 'modern' pasta meal with a 'convenient' pre-cooked sauce take the same amount of time and consideration to prepare. Whether they are made at home or consumed at a fast- or even self-service bistro, these meals are prepared under the same intention: to use less time to prepare a full meal. For the consumer, there is no categorical difference; his preferences will be based on his tastes, convenience, quality and price.

Neither should price be a defining feature. The fourth-biggest self-identifying FF chain in Germany (*Nordsee*) is considered a 'premium' outlet, with relatively expensive fish-on-the-go meals that are inaccessible on a low income. In supermarkets targeting the Dutch urban middle class, elaborate pre-cooked, microwavable 'gourmet' meals sell for 10–15€ per person, not including the separate salad and cheese plate

packages that complete the 'fast meal after a long day at the office'. Whether or not they are taken out of their vacuum plastic packaging and presented on fancy plates as veritable 'four-course meals', they are quintessentially FF meals, and thus part of the extensive panorama of ways people use to actualize their necessity or desire to, under certain circumstances, prepare and serve food quickly.

A further problematique emerges when we try to account for the actual time spent preparing a meal. It should be noted that the preparation of some meals considered archetypes of 'FF', such as burgers or pre-cooked microwave meals, takes place in veritable 'value chains' of food preparation involving a number of food workers and sites.[3] When taking note of the full process of production, their preparation often takes much longer than most 'slow' meals where the home or restaurant kitchen sees the full process from raw ingredients to finished meal. The added time means that such processes are only profitable if many units are prepared at once and marketed *en masse*[4] (Fig. 1).

Examining the routine of deferring food preparation to specialized workers is of course part and parcel of a wider critical appreciation of the division of labor in complex societies. FS has introduced strong arguments towards limiting this division of labor in agriculture and food processing—calling for more diversified farms, less industrialized food processing chains, and a certain degree of self-provisioning in households, villages and regions (Alkon and Mares 2012; Altieri and Toledo 2011). Wittman argues that in order to close the 'metabolic rift', "La Via Campesina responds to specialization with diversification" (2009: 813). FS movements' ideal-types of household autonomy and self-sufficiency at the first steps of the food chain are often extended to latter steps, favoring processing in cottage industries and farmer-led cooperatives, retail in small family-run stores and market stalls, and food preparation in the family home or in family-run restaurants. Jaffe and Gertler (2006) focus on how 'consumption skills' in choosing, cooking and preserving foods in the household have been lost, and see the household as the principal arena for a recovery.

What would FS—the re-valorization of food production and processing—mean for the global majority who are not producers of food? To what degree, and through what channels, is the division of labor that makes them passive recipients of food products 'acceptable'? How far does the household's or individual's sovereignty over food choices have to translate into self-sufficient food preparation, and how (far) can food preparation labor be a specialized task of food workers without countering

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[3] This shows how the (in-)visibility of food work intervenes in conventional wisdom on 'fast food'. When we defer the act of cooking to a professional (by visiting a restaurant), the general notion is that we do not consume fast food. Yet, when the act is deferred twice, meaning that we deal only with a food worker who warms up, or arranges, components cooked elsewhere, the same meal typically becomes 'fast food'.

[4] At the same time, the price of many corporate fast foods benefits from a regulatory environment that allows many of its integral costs to be externalized; the 'real price' may be much larger than the price consumers pay when chooses a corporate fast food meal over other options (both 'slow' and 'fast'). It is vital for the corporations involved that much of their production process remains invisible, which obscures labor exploitation (social externalities), environmental externalities of production, and enormously complex supply chains.
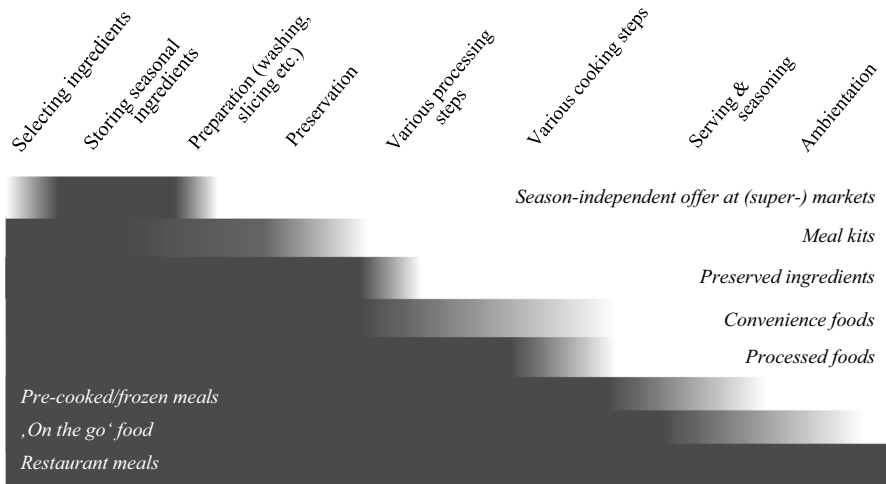
Fig. 1 Divisions of labor in food preparation

the purpose of that sovereignty? This question can be posed both from a consumer perspective (health, cultural appropriateness, and affordability), from a producer perspective (sustainability, dignified work, and value), and on the meta-level of societal power relations over space and vital goods. Naturally, these are questions that cannot and should not be answered here, but through the deliberative processes of social movements themselves. What we attempt is merely to unhinge some of the dichotomies and ideas about FF and its place in FS that may have become near-dogmas, to (hopefully) carry FS's ideals into new spheres and aspects of modern food systems. What might a FS-conducive FF look like, how is it produced, how is it owned, and how is it reproduced and developed over time?

We present next a historical review of FF, aimed at underlining the existence of a diversity of mostly non-corporate and often healthy FFs in history and present. With this in mind, we then review some existing projects to replace FF (i.e. 'alternatives *to* FF'), most of them well rooted in the FS framework. Subsequently, we tackle our central area of concern: complementary alternatives *within* FF. Finally, we look at how the study of 'FF sovereignty' can advance as part of FS, and thereto propose a methodological framework that aims to understand and distinguish different realities of FF in the terms and priorities established in FS literature and practice. This, we argue, requires moving beyond any narrow framework that pits FF against "Slow Food".

Histories of Time-Constrained Food Preparation

Though complex and fascinating changes to the political economy of FF provision have occurred over the last decades, the idea of—and extensive need for—FF are already part of the very first divisions of labor in complex societies. On most of the

prominent street crossings in the Roman town of Pompeii (preserved in volcanic ash since the year 79), the remnants of one or two *thermopolia* are still visible: stone counters with sunk-in molds of 60–80 cm diameter that were once closed by clay lids. In them, pre-cooked empanada-like snacks would be kept warm throughout the day and sold to pedestrians (Monteix 2007). Ellis (2004) counts at least 154 such establishments in the excavated parts of the city. Evidence of robust 'eating out' cultures, including FF 'take aways', is also described in Macro Polo's diaries of his travels in thirteenth-century China, and in the histories of market towns in Medieval India and Northern Africa (Allison 2011; Tannahill 1988: 138; Roger 1999: 1147). In the centers of Aztec towns and cities, ready-to-eat preparations of maize (tortillas and tamales with a variety of 'top-ups' such as fish, red beans, frogs and turkey eggs) were sold in the streets. Yet, instead of convenience, Biskowski (2000: 294–296) shows that firewood scarcity and the high fuel requirements of this standard Aztec diet led to a shift of food preparation from individual households to specialized tortilla-vendors. In the Medieval English town, in turn, FF already had all the aspects associated with the term today, yet without a corporate format (Carlin 1998). In short, FF has been part of divisions of food preparation labor in complex societies long before the advent of corporate capitalism.

One could argue that the history of FF as a human concept really began when nomadic hunters and gatherers established ways to prepare foods that could be taken on a longer hunt and consumed without further preparation. Not unlike today, the primary utility of these foods was to allow people to extend nutrition from moments of sufficient time, and places suitable and equipped for food preparation, into moments and places where these requirements are not met, and to thus allow their bodies to dwell in a much wider variety of places during larger stints of time.[5] Using the broader definition, indigenous 'pemmican' foods—combinations of preserved meat and fruit that resemble 'power bars', as well as the salted seafood preserves of sub-Arctic peoples are great examples of ancient FFs.

Patterns of FF production and consumption have transformed through spontaneous and gradual shifts, both due to innovations and cultural changes within societies, as well as migration and transculturation on an inter-regional level. During the first "food regime" (1870s–1930s), however, railways, steam ships and refrigeration turned a number of agricultural products such as beef and wheat into globally traded commodities (Friedmann and McMichael 1989; McMichael 2009: 141–142). A growing part of these harvests came from colonial plantations and settler-farmers, based on which Friedmann terms it the 'colonial-diasporic' regime. Before this era of colonial expansion and industrial capitalism, FFs were no less important, yet they

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[5] In a way, even nature herself offers some fast foods by preserving nutrients in a ready-to-eat state—like ripe fruit that stays on the tree and (from the human perspective) can be picked at any moment during certain windows of time, or put in a cold place and maintained for months. Given that an apple or banana, for example, competes with a handful of fries or a hamburger over what food people buy/eat when they need food fast, it fits into the same broad category of potential FFs. Nonetheless, the same banana (or the same potato slices or burger patty, for that matter) in another food preparation setting may be part of a slow meal. This also points to how it is not the ingredients that define fast food, but the mode of consumption/preparation.

were more so tied to relatively local economies, trade networks and customs. During the first food regime, however, ingredients like white-flour-based bread, sugared durables, and preserved beef expanded the realm of possibility for food that could be made and consumed fast, even if after extensive geographic travel (see e.g. Saderson's 1986 study of the 'world steer').

It should be noted that these processes altered the social relations in food *production* much more dramatically than those around food *preparation*. The preparation of FFs in particular remained overwhelmingly in the hands of small family businesses, even as the channels through which the ingredients reached them corporatized around key infrastructures (railways, shipping, mills and slaughterhouses). The second, 'mercantile-industrial' food regime (1950s-70s) consolidated this trajectory, moved the locus of hegemony to the U.S., and induced dietary transitions by subsuming subsistence economies and home-based food preparation to new industrial value chains which increasingly complicated food *processing* with *preparation*. During this second regime wheat and meat along with new 'durable food' commodities became global arbiters of diet, power, and taste (Friedmann 1992). These expanded and emerging food complexes of the 1960s enabled the spread of a small number of FFs relying on certain kinds of ingredients (especially wheat, meat and sugar, but also year-around fruits and vegetables). While much of the historical FF was prepared daily and fresh, which limited the scale and locality of its production, increased shelf life—and thus volumes and distances—allowed the development of corporate value chains around a small subset of existing FFs, such as burger patties and sausages, as well as new ingredients and types of FF (such as the reviled 'pink slime' that constitutes Chicken McNuggets).

The third and current regime, more intensely based on global value chains and corporate actors and marketing, has included trends of 'supermarketization', the consolidation of 'food empires' around specific standardizable crops (van der Ploeg 2010) and the emerging dominance of 'ultra-processed products' in food supplies worldwide (Monteiro et al. 2013). With recognition of an "increasing homogeneity in global food supplies" (Khoury et al. 2014) and "the pandemic of obesity in developing countries" (Popkin et al. 2012), it is clear that the periphery of globalizing capitalism today is not immune to manifestations of this new regime. The aggressive marketing of corporate FFs (both those prepared at corporate outlets and those bought in supermarkets and prepared at home) and displacement of established alternative food options (including non-corporate FFs) often spearhead these trends.

Alternatives to Fast Food

Consequently, the rejection of the corporate food regime is generally accompanied by calls to 'return' to the fresh, home-prepared, family-shared meal (and its reproduction in professional settings, such as restaurants or catering). While this is most notably the case in the Slow Food movement, where the 'slow meal' has become a ritual of transcendence, FS discourse in general has treated homemade meals as an ideal type. Though Slow Food has identified professional chefs as important actors in food system transformation, this interest is principally grounded in the

hope that professional chefs could act as 'guardians' of slow food practices, knowledges and skills, ultimately teaching the rest of us how to implement them (mostly) at home. Practical proposals and projects with a FS discourse focus on promoting food growing, cooking and preservation skills to allow fast/processed food consumers to transition towards self-reliant and healthy nutrition (e.g. Lutz and Schachinger 2013). The nested food markets FS promotes (farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture, direct trade links) thus focus on channeling fresh local produce and traditional/vernacular preserved foods from independent farms to independent households (Schneider et al. 2016). While the FS movement still debates how sovereignties on different scales may interact (and restrict each other), most actors see producer and consumer households as the crucial 'sovereign' unit whose rights to cultivate and prepare "healthy, culturally-appropriate food" (World Forum on Food Sovereignty 2007) must be effectively safeguarded by a series of communal institutions, unions, state agencies and judiciable rights (Edelman 2014). FS begins in the fields, and its logical conclusion is in the kitchen. In the Slow Food movement, of course, the shared meal, prepared with sufficient time and care and shared without hurry is even more archetypal and ritualistic.

The FS perspective offers three potent avenues for policy changes that seek to counteract the development of corporate, unhealthy and unsustainable FF cultures, limit the international colonizing/homogenizing drive of these FF cultures (Khoury et al. 2014), and make cooking with healthy and culturally rich ingredients the possible norm. The first and most evident avenue is laid out by FS' demands to remove the broad state-enforced privileges and subsidies bequeathed to food corporations through which they gained and maintain market dominance in staple and FF chains. Many of these are policy 'leftovers' from the second food regime (McMichael 2009; Pritchard 2009), yet they continue to enable and embolden the producers, processors and (worldwide) distributors of cheap caloric content (Graddy-Lovelace and Diamond 2017). The dismantling of 'food empires'—concentrated nodes of corporate power in the food system—is a prerequisite to a level playing field on which the advantages of agroecological peasant production (for habitat quality, carbon sequestration, autonomous/decent work, food quality), localized and cooperative distribution (for producer prices, surpluses remaining in community, versatility/flexibility), and skilled food preparation and preservation (for health, household economy and autonomy, conviviality and cultural quality) can be presented and gain traction.

Second, through FS's keen understanding of class, its actors have understood the need for greater autonomy not only for peasant producers, but also for the working classes whose food options are systematically reduced by time and budget constraints. For the careful pursuit of nutritional health, cooking skill and food culture, workers must see a larger share of the surplus they produce *as well as* have the right to reduce work and work-associated time (and strain) in favor of personal, social, cultural and political activities. Third, FS advocates for the preservation and expansion of 'peasant' or 'traditional' foods, often via the frame of decolonized foodways and 'nested markets' (van der Ploeg et al. 2012; Peña et al. 2017). Overall, however, likely due to the fact that FS theory and practices emerged through the activism of producers and small farmers' unions, there are few explicit elaborations (by FS

movements or academics) of what a food-sovereign consumption system looks like (see Edelman 2014: 972–3).

And even if the debate we seek to open does find that a fundamental incompatibility exists between FS and FF, food activism does not take place in a vacuum. In the 1960s, the US 'Black Panther Party' argued that activist programs must focus on "survival pending revolution" (Heynen 2009: 416). Looking at systematic change towards a slow food world as a long-term project ('revolution'), survival must still be attended to. Hence, space for alternatives *within FF* itself must be pursued simultaneously.

Alternatives Within Fast Food

Critical research and activism around FF must depart from a framing that recognizes *multiple FF options* that answer a *legitimate demand*, and from awareness of *capital-driven structural change* that favors some of these options over others. If not informed by both, food-related activism tends to drift towards a focus on reforming consumer habits, such as public awareness campaigns around healthy eating, gardening programs for urban youth, or pamphlets for dietary change. Such campaigns tackle the problems of unhealthy or unethical eating from the point of consumptive choice. While they rest on the correct assumption that part of the demand for corporate FF is produced by advertisement, unavailable science-based information, lack of cooking skills or unavailability of fresh ingredients, they often neglect what we call legitimate, or rational, demand for FF.

We hypothesize that this demand covers a significant share of the total market for FF in all 'developing' and 'developed' countries, and encompasses both urban and rural populations (especially as these categories increasingly blur and overlap). The circumstances that clearly merit the buying or making of quickly-prepared meals include:

1. Workers who cannot reach home for lunch because of short lunch breaks and/or commuting distance, and whose workplaces fail to provide 'slow food' lunch services;
2. working-class people whose obligations to work and family leave them little time to procure and prepare fresh foods on a regular basis;
3. single householders or others for whom, for various reasons, the time and money cost of maintaining a kitchen and regularly cooking slow meals may prove prohibitive;
4. workers without access to food preparation space;
5. temporary or seasonal migrants and travelers;
6. and (somewhat more controversial perhaps) those who have come to cherish the work of specific individual cooks or vendors whose skilled specialization in a given food preparation technique cannot be reproduced in the home kitchen.

A singular focus on 'restoring the slow meal', hence, is inappropriate for a time where meals (especially lunch) are often eaten outside the family home (while that 'family home' itself is not invariably the norm). The slow restaurant meal, albeit serving complementary functions (such as contexts 6 and, to a lesser extent, 4 and 5 in the list above), does little to bridge the core disbalance between 'gold standard' and 'tin realities'. Perhaps ironically, the annual *Terra Madre* congress/*Salone del Gusto*, the main event of the global network of Slow Food movements, heavily relies on FF options to feed its delegates and visitors, from Neapolitan *arancini* (deep-fried stuffed rice balls coated in bread crumbs), to Abbruzese *arrosticini* (grilled mutton skewers) and, of course, on-the-go *pizza* in all forms and varieties. In practice, the fast-vs.-slow dichotomy is already at times transcended by a more complex valuation of food options within specific contexts.

When recognizing that people can forgo slow food preparation voluntarily for a variety of reasons, and that a great part of the population forgoes it involuntarily for a variety of legitimate reasons, FS should not ignore these situations. Doing so would turn FS practices into a privilege and feed into various critiques voiced by proponents of an industrial food system. Such an approach would be similar to side-stepping the plight of farmworkers by singularly focusing on small/peasant farms (Brown and Getz 2011). A FS practice that focuses on restoring 'the slow meal' thus excludes many situations where solutions based on FS principles are dearly needed. Where 'slowing down' to cook and eat obtains a normative component, the implied 'return to the kitchen' can also reinforce time-crunch and gender inequality (Bowen et al. 2014; Matchar. 2013). Even if we agree with the Slow Food axiom that food should be prepared with great care and dedication, there is no reason why this task cannot, at times, be delegated and split up in ways that make good food available, fast.

We propose four determinants of alternative FFs that would accord with the FS paradigm:

(a) *Nutrition*: Are they healthy/healthier?
(b) *Livelihoods*: Under what working conditions were they produced? Is ownership and direction of the production process centralized (corporate) or dispersed (artisan/peasant)? And who can access these economic spaces?
(c) *Linkages*: What kind of agriculture do they connect with? How do they affect farming and therefore the environment? And how do they connect with their (often urban) surroundings?
(d) *Access*: What is the price (affordability) and physical accessibility of these foods in the urban/rural landscape? What groups are they aimed at, and who is excluded and why?

Nutritional aspects are the direct result of the ingredients and the technical processes (cooking or frying, frozen storage or fresh preparation) involved in making a FF. While we recognize that consensus on what is 'healthy' is not complete or

consistent[6] nor culturally universal (see Guthman 2003), we assume that healthy diets include a diversity of nutritionally dense foods (vegetables, grains, legumes, fruit and nuts) and limit the proportion of processed, particularly animal-derived ingredients. Careful preparation ensures that the nutritional quality of ingredients is maintained, while limiting the potential for pathogen contamination. Within the FS paradigm, however, nutrition is a biological process *embedded in culture*. It criticizes 'nutritionism' for its "reductive focus on nutrients […] at the expense of other ways of understanding food and nutritional quality", which works to sideline culturally diverse ways of being healthful (Clapp and Scrinis 2017: 582; Scrinis 2008). Health is about whole diets, not specific nutrients, and almost any particular FF can play positive and negative roles in different 'food environments' (such as *food deserts*) and food cultures.

With respect to *livelihoods and labor*, FS asserts an anti-corporate stance, taking the side of small family-run businesses in horizontal value chains. This stance is linked to demands for worker justice and more ecologically-sound production processes, which would annul most of the 'competitive advantages' of large-scale farming. Many FS advocates and movements see peasant production as a *non-capitalist* mode of production with its own orbit of decision-making processes and values. In this view, "it is the absence [or relative subsumption] of the capital-labor relation that turns particular units of agricultural production into peasant farms" (van der Ploeg 2013: 15). By allowing this conceptualization of peasant farms to travel up and down food value chains, the FS agenda can be broadened from farming and rurality to the complementary spaces of food processing, transport, vending and preparation—including both 'slow' gastronomy and FF. A FS-conforming FF landscape would thus consist of small businesses whose operations are not controlled, directed or substantially shaped by corporations. Like peasant farms, such businesses seek to avoid, subvert and overturn capitalist logics (e.g. profit, wage labor, externalities) in their functioning, making them incompatible with absentee ownership or outside investments (Robbins 2015). Rather, family or small collectives form the basis of such 'labor units', so that the 'labor product' achieved by its operations is distributed among those doing the work, or employed in their ecological or social concerns. Under this condition, labor itself is imbued with a greater sense of place, craft and skill.[7] Finally, such a conceptualization would allow FS to avoid copying the bourgeois opposites between 'high food culture', the 'chefs' who uphold it and the distinguished consumers who afford it, and 'mass food culture', the 'cooks' who labor for it and the working classes reproduced by it (Bourdieu 1984).

An example of a local web of FF businesses that has advanced significantly in the livelihood dimension of 'FF sovereignty' is the Arizmendi network of bakeries/

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[6] Nutrition scientists have for over a 100 years sought the implications of certain nutrients on human health, and in the process demonized and lionized various components of foods—fats, sugars, carbohydrates, specific vitamins. Sometimes even broad scientific consensus has shifted with new studies, 'bad' components becoming 'good', and vice versa.

[7] Research on livelihoods of course requires an understanding of the grey areas between archetypical class positions (peasant, entrepreneurial, capitalist etc.). Here, van der Ploeg's the concept of 'degrees of peasantness' (van der Ploeg 2009: 36, 137–8) can be applied.

pizzerias in the San Francisco Bay Area. Since its modest beginning in 1974, this network of worker-owned cooperatives has grown to six small collectives. Their legal structure assures that no profit is generated and lost to absentee owners, giving worker-owners significant financial leeway to pay more for better/more ethically-sourced ingredients, donate to a variety of activist causes, and better navigate the crunch between rising costs of living for themselves (due to rampant gentrification in the Bay Area) and maintain affordable prices for their products. The rise of rent levels in particular has worked to pit the concerns of alternative farmers against those of low-income urban consumers, with the worker-owners faced with the difficult decision between buying cheaper inputs or raising prices on the menu (interviews with worker-owners, 15. October 2018).

As a key contributor to the regional and national cooperative movement, the Arizmendi Association also uses its FF and bakery outlets (and part of their income) to politicize food, push policy changes around it, and advocate for cultural shifts towards cooperativism and mutual aid between existing non-(or at least less-)capitalist enterprises. The collectives have also found a non-capitalist path for expansion by setting up a loan fund for new worker-cooperatives, as well as sharing their recipes, techniques, suppliers and organizational models.

Whether capitalism as an (inter-)national system of power relations can be transformed through the relative autonomy and 'everyday resistance' (van der Ploeg et al. 2012) of small labor units operating on less- or non-capitalist principles is an ongoing debate in both food systems literature (Allen and Kovach 2000; Bernstein 2014; Guthman 2007; McMichael 2011; Sbicca 2015) and in counter-hegemonic social movements. Jansen (2015), Soper (2019) and others have pointed out how peasants can create 'bottom-up' capitalism in the countryside: the same acknowledgement must be made for would-be 'FF sovereignty' operations. Some of the FS-inspired FF businesses we encountered, however, have taken steps towards preventing their own expansion and capitalization.

Linkages refers to the potential for (fast) food processors and vendors to form mutually-beneficial relations with suppliers, which work to sustain alternative food production in an age of supermarkets and long-distance supply chains. This includes not only the *economic* and *social* relations of co-operation over market logics, but also *ecological* considerations around resource use (transport distances, reliance on freezing and cold storage, use of frying oil, ecological solutions for packaging, as well as the architecture, furniture and decoration of the FF restaurant and installations in its supply chain). Partnerships between peasant farms and upstream food processing, retail or gastronomy businesses can be studied as 'nested markets' which incorporate social and ecological concerns into mutually-beneficial sales arrangements on a local or regional scale (van der Ploeg et al. 2012). All of these linkages are also eminently *political*: Just like the everyday labor of small agroecological farmers expresses and contributes to FS movements, alternative food vendors can use their visibility in urban locations to showcase alternative rural–urban links for the benefit of producer movements, vendors alliances, and consumer movements.

Recent studies have shed new light on how the choice of particular (groups of) ingredients often causes far more extensive ecological damage through linkages than can be 'repaired' by choosing the most ecologically-friendly provider of that

ingredient. Sharply lowering the consumption of animal products in particular has crystallized as a potent (and in many richer polities unavoidable) agenda for food system transformation. As "meat, aquaculture, eggs, and dairy use ∼ 83% of the world's farmland and contribute 56–58% of food's different emissions, despite providing only 37% of our protein and 18% of our calories" (Poore and Nemecek 2018: 990), corporate diets that are high in animal products should not simply be reproduced on smaller scales and with different techniques. Food system transformation especially on the North American and European continents must begin with recognition that high meat and dairy consumption (regardless of the techniques employed) is a key factor linked to land scarcity, the global land rush and land speculation, undermining young farmers seeking to contribute to FS. Even in the developing world, shifts to a more local/regional land base and more egalitarian approaches to land must start from an analysis of the spatial and environmental 'footprint' of diets—including those offered by traditional as well as new FFs. Here we see a potential clash between broader concerns for sustainable food systems and the uncritical view of culinary traditions both within Slow Food (whose 'arcs of taste' overrepresent animal products, for example) and within many of Via Campesina's member organizations.

Access has been another crucial theme in the study of alternative food systems and clearly forms the foundation of food justice advocacy. Good food should be both *affordable* and *accessible* in urban and rural geographies and cultures (Alkon and Agyeman 2011). It is clear that the wider policy context of the third food regime imposes structural disadvantages on food businesses that implement sustainable sourcing and/or fair remuneration. The end price, however, depends not only on whether the FF business accepts higher prices from better suppliers or pays a fairer share to labor. Significant autonomy exists for small FF businesses to develop their menus with affordability in mind (i.e. using simple, inexpensive ingredients but paying premiums for high-standard sourcing) and decrease unit costs through good workplace organization, craftsmanship and 'self-exploitation'. In German non-corporate FF, which has a 60–70% share of sales in the country, prices are typically as low as at corporate outlets (though portions tend to be much larger, with a 3–4$US *kebab* or *dürüm* being a complete meal), yet food workers earn a much larger share of revenue and are in a position to bring their respective cultural preferences into their work.

Affordability, then, can be addressed in situ by engaged small businesses, supported by consumers who 'vote with their fork'. At the same time, there is a potent role for cooperative associations who negotiate and agitate on behalf of members, lower the transport and transaction costs in value chains and pressure local governments (Table 1).

Table 1 Divergent FF economies

Case	Nutrition	Livelihoods	Linkages	Access
Corporate fast food	Most menu items severely malnutritive	Systematic worker exploitation; shareholder and management profits	High externality costs; links with corporate agriculture	Affordable and 'convenient'
Turkish fast food, Germany	Mixed—high salad content, but also meat-heavy	Immigrant opportunities; family base; self-management	Conventional wholesale markets + small migrant-based specialty producers	Able to compete with the cheapest corporate FF options
Cafeterias, Cuba	Full, traditional meals; sandwiches	Family-/home-based; self-management; legal precarity	Local nested markets with small farms	Many small outlets, affordable options
Arizmendi Bakeries, U.S.	Whole grains; all-vegetarian, but cheese-heavy	Worker-ownership; horizontal expansion by cooperative replication	Largely with local/regional small producers; seasonal ingredients	Relatively affordable option in gentrifying metropolis

Beyond the "Fast-Slow" Binary—Trade-Offs, Prices and the Contradictions of Selling Good Food Under Capitalism

The vagueness of common FF definitions has provided entry-points for both existing and new corporations to defuse social and ecological concerns over their business models. All of the multinationals, as well as many medium-sized enterprises aimed at middle-class consumers, are showing that they can profit from increased health conscience by broadening their menus, and marketing fetishized 'health brands' and feel-good FFs (Ryu et al. 2010). This further polarizes the food system as bifurcated eating, with health and culture becoming commodified as 'value-added'. To build solidarity across the food chain, theoretical approaches are needed which connect existing typologies of farm operations (e.g. peasant, entrepreneurial and capitalist) with similar categorizations applied to food preparation operations, other parts of food value chains, and beyond (Fig. 2).

A significant number of small FF vendors implement Slow Food's manifesto that food should be 'good, clean and fair' (Petrini 2003), while also providing answers to the 'corporate question' raised by FS advocates. As the corporate food regime attempts to absorb discursive elements of discontent raised by, amongst others, organic, Slow Food, vegetarian/vegan, agroecology, and food justice movements, a central element of defense could be to highlight small-scale, worker-owned food businesses as homologues of peasant/family farms.

In a context of one-sided agricultural and infrastructural subsidies, governmental failures to limit evictions and economic displacement in gentrifying cities, and food market governance that favors corporate value chains, small-scale FF processors and vendors are often faced with a 'price parity paradox': choices in favor of 'good' food (nutritional quality, positive linkages, their own livelihoods) must be weighed against steps towards greater affordability (price, location). As long as markets are tilted towards capital, the market strategies of alternative (peasant, artisan)

Fig. 2 Feel-good marketing for pricey organic FF in Berkeley, California

businesses must be supplemented by movement building towards a transformative vision such as FS (which in some contexts requires pushing against/beyond depoliticized efforts motivated by purely 'entrepreneurial' theories of change).

Analogue to the search for pro-peasant agricultural policies, FS can stimulate debates on how to support, organize and/or cluster desirable forms of food processing and preparation, including FF vending. Corporate lobbies have promoted laws that ostensibly promote 'food safety', yet end up shielding their own business from bottom-up competition. Given the positive significant effects that healthier FF options could have on some public accounts (such as health insurance), economic arguments can be made in favor of subsidizing small businesses that provide such options. This could take place by earmarking vending spaces in publicly owned buildings (e.g. train and metro stations) at below-market rate rent, or offering simplified procedures and low rates and fees for small business taxation and licensing. In the U.S. context, so-called 'cottage food laws' for on-farm food processing could be extended to also reduce the regulatory burden and barriers for urban small-scale food preparation and sales (including street food) (see e.g. Sustainable Economies Law Center n.d).

Our discussion indicates that the focus on the velocity or simplicity of how a food is prepared is not helpful for FS. FF will not go away, but it can be transformed. The fast-versus-slow dichotomy slows possible advances of FS's concepts and practices into the urban and non-farmer imaginary. Such a dichotomy also works to differentiate food movements' reach along class lines: It assists in capturing middle classes, but misses crucial concerns of many working class people, thus often outright repelling them. Instead, a FS agenda in practice and scholarship must begin with existing conditions and forms of consumption and find all avenues available for achieving the nutritive, livelihood, production linkages, and affordability outcomes that FS implies. Struggles directed against corporate FF, in particular, must integrate practices that 'decelerate' cooking and eating with options—and livelihoods—in nutritious, farm-linked, culturally diverse and affordable FF.

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