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COMMENTARY

Culture as Rules – Putting People (Back) into Sustainability through Food

Eeva Berglund

I routinely deal with food and its infrastructures in my research and teaching, but they have never been the actual focus of my research. Since my doctoral research, carried out in Germany in the early 1990s, I have been interested in environmental social movements and sustainability policy. I now see, however, that food has a very important place at the core of academic, activist and professional engagements with (un)sustainability. With food comes culture, and culture in turn is crucial to understanding and addressing sustainability crises. I will make the point through tracing my own research experiences but also some personal anecdote, as I did at the closing discussion of SIEF 2021 on ‘Baking the Rules’.

Environmental problems

Posed as a question – Breaking the Rules? – I took the SIEF conference title as an invitation to talk about what is new in social movements and, while sitting convivially around the online-mediated dining table, to explore promising pathways for meaningful research. The older and wider context of environmental politics is still the influential discourse of ‘solving’ shared problems through ‘innovation’ (using the quotation marks to signal that those terms have many, not always politically neutral, uses). However, exploring food and its multiple associations is putting culture and human ingenuity – the core subject matter of ethnology and anthropology after all – ever more explicitly into environmental politics.

The strong technoscientific bias in sustainability talk has been tempered somewhat by the now practically mainstream language of the Anthropocene. That does put the human into the planetary, but blind-spots remain, as countless critics argue (e.g. Barca 2020), when humanity is imagined through the WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich, Democratic) lenses that still dominate at the international level where consequential environmental governance is largely being worked out. Besides the Anthropocene, there are more esoteric or at least philosophically challenging intellectual vocabularies such as new materialism (MacGregor 2021) and its many vibrant relatives that work with concepts such as ontology and pluriverse (Escobar 2017, de la Cadena and Blaser 2018). Sometimes overlapping with these are pursuits more direct-

ed at practical concerns, such as discard studies (see <https://discardstudies.com/>) or extractivism research (see <https://www2.helsinki.fi/en/conferences/exalt-2022>), both woven as much from academic as from activist labours. These languages and grammars are turning around definitions of the problems and crises that the world is jointly facing, and shaking up notions of who the heroes, villains and victims might be. Here academia aligns increasingly with activism for epistemological as well as ethical reasons, challenging the rules of business-as-usual and policy or politics-as-usual far more than even a generation ago, not just in the study of culture, but even in climate research (Capstick et al. 2022). An inspiring example rooted in anthropology is Anna Tsing's and her colleagues' powerful take on what modernity-as-usual means today, available online in *Feral Atlas* (Tsing et al. 2020).

We have moved on a good distance from the times of my doctoral studies when I really struggled with my chosen topic, the question of how and why ordinary people in Europe protested the ordinary local damages of modern development (Berglund 1998). On the one hand, I initially had trouble making material damage matter to peers and professors who were interested primarily in society and culture. On the other hand, I was nervous of even addressing the mainstream, for whom 'environmental' problems were technical, let alone trying to persuade them that culture mattered (too).

The former challenge, of making material constraints apparent, was in a way the easier one. Like Greta Thunberg, we burgeoning environmental social scientists followed 'the science', however aware of its internal complexities, hesitations and contradictions. Supported by a historical and sociological understanding of science, researchers of my generation did a lot – I feel – without necessarily destabilising the underlying premise that technoscience deals with universals while culture explains surface variation. And with actor-network thinking and other ethnographically grounded ways of complicating the reified dualisms in our western habits of thought, it became even easier to incorporate materials, meanings and the dynamics of complex systems into our accounts. Following Bruno Latour, an inspiration to many of us, we sometimes felt we achieved that simply by producing long lists of the affected entities and expecting that this mixing and matching of actors that western science preferred to keep separate, would serve to destabilise old-fashioned dualisms.

Making culture matter has been harder. In the late 20th century, cultures of environmental management and protection had traction to the extent that they aligned with cultures of technical and scientific expertise. Even when they did so, much justified worry was written off as ramblings from 'prophets of doom', such as the authors of *Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al. 1972). The post-war 'great acceleration' of fossil-fuel-based economic activity and the so-

cio-ecological vulnerability and damages associated with this meant problems of planetary scale. Across many governments but also in different political movements, a view emerged that global solutions and world-wide institutions represented the best chances of addressing them. Instead, we got the Rio declaration of 1992, and the countless conferences, summits, conventions and statements that it inspired. But as a break on damaging practices it was ultimately disappointing (see for example Scoones et al. 2015) and arguably led to subordinating the ecological environment and people's embodied and local experiences to the needs (or lobbying) of mainstream economics and finance. Powerful spokespersons for neoliberal arrangements effectively put the regulation of environmental harms – broadly defined – back by decades while environmentalists mostly remained caught in the detached language of science and so struggled to communicate the urgency of the situation (Wapner 2021). An already entrenched industrial-capitalist assault on life may have been gathering pace, but the global environmental governance we got was not a technocratic super-ministry working out how to thrive within limits, but a series of inter-governmental agreements of varying effectiveness reached after painstaking negotiations. These put in place a kind of UN-sanctioned, recognisably western-friendly global institutional apparatus and its prevailing ethos, increasingly captured by critics with the idea of One-World-Worldism (Escobar 2017). This framework not only reinstated the problematic hierarchies of those western dualisms (science trumps belief, the west is better than the rest, and so on), it obscured the cultural specificity of western economics itself and the mainstream cultural features that it reinforced and that in turn reinforced it. With this cultural blindness, even those of us already fearful for 'the environment', failed to notice the weirdness of the WEIRD world and the knowledge practices it insisted upon. As a result, countless edifices, practices and innovations that were based on cultural and economic rules *other* than those of neoliberal and notionally western capitalism have continued to be belittled and destroyed.

However, in the shadowlands of modernity, endless variations on how to be human have persisted, as researchers of culture will know. Academics and activists have documented many of these together with devastations experienced at the geographical margins of global capitalism. Equally important has been the fact that some time ago researchers also started to put the engines of neoliberal normality under the spotlight, for instance by studying bureaucracies or finance workers or, indeed, forms of middle-class activism as I did.

The sustainability of the food system

As an anthropology graduate researching environmental protest in the 1990s I found it extremely helpful that the discipline was already characterised by "a

continuous dialectical tacking between the most local of local detail and the most global of global structure in such a way as to bring them into simultaneous view” (Geertz 1983, 69). Today, culturally sensitive research on food and its increasingly global travels benefits from this legacy, as numerous exciting texts straddling agricultural economics, histories of technology and socio-cultural dynamics have demonstrated recently. Food in its global guise has now come to the attention even of those like me who arrived there via a focus on local urban phenomena, such as the now ubiquitous practice of urban farming.

I see talk of a so-called food system in 2022 as somewhat misleading. The system appears more as some kind of out-of-control yet baked-in machinery producing social, ecological and epidemiological troubles at ever bigger scales. The word system implies something reproducible as an entity, which the dominant global system of food provision is not (even if sacrificing some people and places might be considered an acceptable way to sustain it in the shorter term). As in the world of capitalist innovation generally, and as sociologist Ulrich Beck spelled out in the 1980s with his book, *The Risk Society*, no single mastermind and no detailed blueprint preceded the chaotic and paradoxical outcomes of modern enterprise and innovation. Perhaps Beck was ahead of his time (Tooze 2020), but with food at the centre of climate policy and land use ever more recognised as a health issue (not least through global yet variegated experiences of COVID-19), what is gradually coming into view are the dysfunctionalities of this way of organising global exchange. As an observer of and participant in sustainability discourses, my sense is that something else that is coming into view is the fact that the culture (or cultures) of this risk society – the modernity or capitalism or western mainstream ways – does not have universal appeal, nor is its colonising power totalising or inevitable. Like interdependencies between global and local things, this is probably not news to ethnologists or anthropologists, but it is interesting to see others contemplating such possibilities too.

In keeping an ear for activist, municipal and state discourses in Finland where I live, I would even go so far as to claim that recent years have witnessed far-reaching shifts in how environmental policy and practices are discussed. There are at least signs of a ‘cultural turn’ in environmental policy. Though it may not yet be a dominant discourse, it is clear that experts in culture, notably ethnologists, anthropologists and historians of many stripes, are invited to comment and given authority, as new rules for managing the contemporary condition are being worked out.

For me, the closing discussion at SIEF was a wonderful indication of how food research nourishes and energises research on those many domains that have been hampered by the twentieth-century banishment of culture (not com-

plete, but still debilitating) from things environmental. Food is food through a number of contexts, appearing at different stages, in varying roles and enacted in multiple relationships as it constitutes a vital and necessary part of social life. It is cultural, for instance, in the way that the list of possibly edible or inedible things varies from place to place and time to time. Its production, preparation and consumption are nevertheless grounded in geographical and historical situations even as they show infinite ingenuity. Furthermore, great pleasure is taken in this ingenuity and there are tremendous emotional stakes in performing any part of the processes around food according to (or not) the rules. Food and food practices are embodied in the human and nonhuman bodies involved, as well as in the material properties of what becomes food. There are rules about baking bread, for example, that come from the way grains and micro-organisms behave, and that have been learned in laboratories and kitchens over millennia. There are equally significant rules around food that are only intelligible as cultural, as signs or vehicles of belonging. Finally, even before the age of the container ship and the extraordinary machinery feeding global populations today that encompasses land-use patterns, labour practices, economic circuits and biological exchanges, to think of food has always been to think of networks and connections of different kinds. No wonder that one alternative word for those who mistrust the idea of the Anthropocene is Plantationocene (Perry and Hopes 2019)!

What I'm suggesting is that food bridges the yawning gap that we in the environmental social sciences were struggling with in the 1990s, as we tried to persuade one audience that matter mattered and another one that culture mattered. Thirty years on, in the closing discussion, food turned out to be a relatively easy way to overcome that still lingering but by now much altered divide in how we conceptualise the world around us – the environment – between the material-scientific and the meaningful-cultural. By talking about food in its many dimensions and always returning – as scholars of things ethnological do – to the concrete joys and troubles that ordinary people face in their relationships with food, we have maybe avoided the sense of detachment that characterises both the academic poles that were once so easily classified into mutually unintelligible sciences and humanities (the two 'cultures', as British scientist C.P. Snow so famously put it in 1959). In our discussion, the topic of food allowed us to talk intelligibly (I hope) about complex events and environments diffuse in time and space. We used it to talk critically about human diversity and the place of humans on the planet without opposing the cultural to the technical. We spun brief but persuasive stories about how mainstream expertise can be weaker than expertise at the margins. We touched on how art and science work together rather than as mutually exclusive in gener-

ating important knowledge and skill. We also discussed situations where the very framework that pits a centre against a margin is utterly inadequate. Food turned out to be a very good vehicle indeed for discussing some apparently intractable problems that have beset thinkers as well as activists for a long time.

Moral judgements and the contradictions of activism

Our discussion on *Breaking the Rules* also illustrated how the binary oppositions of everyday politics can be reworked into more grounded and defensible, if politically less flashy situations. We discussed how, in talking about food (or any other) activism, one needs to specify what protest is seeking and in what context before one can make any judgement about its rightness or wrongness (however defined). I was delighted by Håkan Jönsson's notion of anti-activism-activism. Such a term is helpful for keeping in mind that although the arena of food provision is easily politicised and moralised, it is impossible to reduce its politics to simple for-or-against antagonisms. The current agro-industrial complex is attached to social and ecological life in such myriad and complicated ways that easy judgement is unwise. Environmental conflict and the many problems that stem from unsustainable systems are in fact never reducible to some good-versus-bad or centre-periphery dynamic, nor can universal 'best' practices ever be easily identified. Careful empirical study, whether undertaken in food studies, political geography, agricultural economics, ethnology or anywhere else, is more likely to undermine any lingering assumptions about development as a linear progression from poor, primitive and hungry at one end to the most developed – often a vaguely defined 'we' – at the other, however scientifically defensible such stages might once have appeared (Massey 2005). In fact, it is probably only from a political and ideological stance of superior detachment that it is even possible to imagine that there is a dominant and politically neutral centre, however threatened (or at least hugely irritated) it might be, by an ideologically biased activist fringe. So, in our discussion, we dwelt at length on the fact that activism and its moral justifications are only intelligible in context. It should be noted that not dissimilar dynamics are increasingly reported in connection with populist politics, where similarly, the same individual can be both oppressed and oppressor (Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco 2021).

So, as we find ourselves drawn – as researchers – to some but not other activist causes, we are still capable of deepening our understanding if not in sympathising with mutually antagonistic political positions. Such insights come from sensitivity to culture and its nuances. They come also with an appreciation that culture is anything but immaterial or a matter of choice.

This brings me back to the tendency of those in power to imagine that theirs is a culture or no culture (Traweek 1988), somehow free of or above the dependencies that in fact constitute human life as emplaced and always simultaneously and irreducibly semiotic and material. This produces, however, a paradox in that, as I (Berglund 2022) and many others have argued, environmentalism itself has been able to bolster western, capitalist, hegemony at the same time as claiming cultural and political neutrality. We are sadly familiar with eco-gentrification for instance, and we know that sustaining environmental quality among the wealthy often means sacrificing some to lives of unimaginably terrifying environmental, that is, everyday, conditions. In much of the environmentalist mainstream, moral indignation blossoms about the dirty or otherwise wrong ways that the poor pollute, leading to perverse outcomes like ever more unsustainable greenwashing and eco-consumerism.

Illustrative examples can be found around the consumption of processed foods, which the wealthy often like to and can afford to avoid. Often they contain multiply problematic ingredients such as palm oil. Now that wealthier consumers in North America and Europe have identified the environmental ills of palm oil, and multinational companies have found replacements more palatable to these fussier consumers (sunflower oil replacing palm oil, for example) the less attractive products are simply marketed more forcefully in Asia and South America (Wilson 2022). The overall environmental burdens have not gone away, nor the health problems, which have simply been shifted elsewhere, probably to places less equipped to deal with their costs.

In my intervention at SIEF, I told the audience about my own apparently paradoxical position, a mix of privilege and discomfort that I know to be shared by many environmentalists. I said I learned to care about the environment from the experience of the Finnish summer cabin on an island in the Baltic Sea, from where I participated in the online panel. I talked about how cabin life in Finland is suffused with rules and rule breaking of many kinds. As children my cousins (from the other cabins of our island paradise) and I learned to respect them because the practical reasons seemed unassailable: high-topped rubber boots would protect against dangerous adder bites, rules about heating saunas, saving fresh water, picking (or not) certain berries or mushrooms or using and cleaning outhouses obviously needed to be followed, at least if one was to be part of the collective. We also learned nuances of etiquette, often around food, that, as some of us have later realised, placed us in a particular social class (even in Finland!). An obvious example might be learning how to eat crayfish and to sing the drinking songs that go with this seasonal activity – not that all of us became accomplished in either of these.

It was that seaside environment that prompted my interest in environmental problems. There I was able to observe fish stocks dwindle and to learn about the effects of eutrophication on wildlife as well as holiday-makers' experience. For blue-green algae has become a routine scourge that can make swimming impossible, besides which sea water no longer always serves even for household purposes - more technologically complicated, energy intensive solutions are needed to enjoy cabin life. Still, as one gets old enough, one also appreciates improvements. One understands that not all change is a sign of damage.

Long ago my annual island experience started to become an emotional roller-coaster, a reminder of paths not taken but also a cherished landscape (or seascape) that connects me to a history and a social world and is obviously part of my identity. It did teach me to care about nature and its creatures, and to appreciate that I am linked – through the abundance of locally produced and therefore obviously fresh food, for example – to the more-than-human world, both on the island and beyond it. With the chance to enjoy that delightful environment every year, I have learned, like many Finns, to think of myself as close to or at least particularly appreciative of nature. The paradox or contradiction is that those of us lucky enough to have access to these paradise-like holiday homes are among the worst perpetrators of the environmental damages. Unless we drop out of our social networks and their material entanglements, we can only live unsustainably.

I hope this does not disqualify us – this rather vaguely defined 'we' – from the debate. Certainly environmentalist sentiment is strong among WEIRD populations, but so long as this leads merely to shifting to new gadgets and adopting lifestyles marketed as green and sustainable, the impacts on wider (consumer) culture and its ecological footprint will be tiny if not perverse, as with the palm oil example. More significant may be that it is precisely in places where transgression carries fewest risks – among the wealthy, by various definitions – that the dualisms of western thought and other self-destructive cultural habits of sustainability-as-usual – are being deconstructed as well as reconstructed in sometimes exciting ways. I do not wish to extol wealth or the wealthy, but if they/we are joining activism, altering everyday habits, calling attention to crisis through political mobilising, artistic pursuits and scientific practices, and so fostering what I have called 'other ways of knowing' (Berglund 2022), the transgressions of wealthy risk takers are worth highlighting. For activists of many backgrounds in many places really are poised to replace the unsustainable political culture of endless economic growth and frenetic technical innovation, I think. Having worked in academia for some time without research funding, these kinds of small efforts

of the luckiest have become something that I have been putting to academic but also political use in various texts on Finnish middle-class activism. I have called this ‘the comfortable slot’ because modern comforts have been so taken for granted here (Berglund 2019), but it is also uncomfortable in that anyone inhabiting it knows how significant is their own role in perpetuating global destruction.

To return to food, it has become a vehicle for thinking about the generalised and diffused crises that combine in the very idea of environmental sustainability. In contrast to the habit of discussing crisis as an abstract global issue, working on shared troubles through food allows other ways of knowing to flourish – eye-to-eye over a meal, elbow-to-elbow in the garden, and art work by art work in public space. Such practices make room for more experimentation about matter and more curiosity about people than older environmentalist formulations allowed. Through such engagements, it also becomes less difficult, even for wealthy westerners, to appreciate that the modernity that for so long appeared to us as universal and inevitable is both odd and oddly (self-)destructive. Rethinking the everyday practices and politics of food means appreciating its histories and above all facing the intellectually demanding issue that today food is always both global and local. Perhaps thinking with food even makes it easier to start unpacking and better coping with the wider forms of unsustainability in our own ways of life as well. I am not suggesting that food-related political activity leads in any automatic way to change, in fact we are witnessing considerable digging in of heels, parochialism (and worse) as well as overtly anti-environmental politics, which scholars of culture must engage with too. Nevertheless, languages and grammars are evolving, however slowly and hesitantly, around food that identify and verbalise our collective crises better than mainstream policy and general-purpose green discourse can.

Our discussion at SIEF demonstrated that to talk of food is always to talk about people and about culture, and to do so in a way that does not ignore its materiality. Thus, as a way of putting people into environmentalism and nuance into crisis talk, scholarship around food may have a bigger role here than I, at least, had appreciated.

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