

Changing the organisation of food production

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Project Description:

Project aims

The aim of this project is to study the organising practices involved in the food production by investigating the agents, processes and mechanisms involved (Moser et al, 2021). In so doing, this project will draw on critical perspectives, highlighting problematic practices in the production of food. Notably, corporate concentration within the global food system reduces the sustainability and diversity of food systems. Similarly, market concentration narrows innovation pathways, towards high-tech high cost solutions, and can lead to higher prices for consumers (Clapp, 2021). Globalized food systems are also associated with loss of biodiversity through overexploitation of ecological resources, use of monocultures and the application of agrochemicals, leading to problems for biodiversity and human health. In order to be sustained, those food systems require a high intensity of unskilled labour where workers are subject to exploitation (Böhm et al., 2020).

Theoretical perspective/field, potential for theoretical contribution and impact

Changing how food production is organised in ways which reduce corporate concentration thus has significant potential benefits, including the contribution to an emerging subfield of organisation studies in which there is still limited research. We therefore encourage research proposals that examine organizing practices that promote greater sustainability, diversity and innovation in food supply chains. We also welcome project proposals that focus on the relationship between food and agri-businesses and society, for example by exploring the circulation and the contestation of sustainability discourses by different actors such as the state, organisations, social movements and the media (Van Bommel and Spicer, 2011). Furthermore, novel theoretical contributions and interdisciplinary approaches are welcome, provided there is a clear connection to organisation studies literatures.

Indicative research questions include:

- What (entrepreneurial, indigenous, feminist or community) organizing practices are being used to challenge and change globalized food production systems?
- What discourses are being used to develop alternatives to globalized food production systems and how are these discourses negotiated and contested?

- How do material relations between food producers, consumers and food develop and/or how is the organization of food production constrained and/or enabled by materiality (e.g. changing climate conditions or the development of lab-conceived or 3-D printed food, or permaculture)?
- How are societal perceptions of the ethical responsibilities of food producers changing and how are multinational food corporations responding to this?

Proposed methodology

We envisage a broadly qualitative approach being adopted in the project. Applicants should be able to demonstrate prior experience in applying appropriate research methods in their own practice. The project may involve a combination of interviews, ethnography, historical and documentary analysis, multi-modal methodologies or visual methods of analysis (Bell and Davison, 2013; Bell and Leonard, 2018).

About the Supervisors:

Prof Emma Bell's research into food production explores changing consumption patterns through digital storytelling (Bell and Leonard, 2018), animal ethics and business (Sayers, Martin and Bell, 2022), and the relationship between craft and industry in material practices of making through an ethnographic study of bakery work.

Dr Charles Barthold's research employs critical approaches to organization studies in order to explore power and resistance in the context of contemporary economic, environmental and social issues. He is also interested in ethics and sustainability in and around organisations. This includes discourses of anthropocentrism and the unethical ways in which animals are treated in the current food system (e.g. see Barthold et al., 2022; Barthold and Bloom, 2020).

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