

Think outside the bun. Freedom narratives about food and the need for global dietary changes

As highlighted by the last IPCC report on climate change (IPCC 2022), in addition to mitigation strategies relying on technological innovation and national and international policies, one relevant way to deal with the climate crisis is through personal behaviours. Among the virtuous lifestyle changes able to reduce greenhouse gasses emissions, shifting to sustainable diets is particularly important in the framework of the abatement of methane emissions, which is the second most abundant greenhouse gas. Methane has a powerful warming potential and a lifespan in the atmosphere of just 10 years, and this means that reducing methane emissions is an effective strategy to reduce near-term global warming (Saunois et al., 2020) and achieve the Paris Agreement's target to limit global warming at 1.5°C (Nisbet et al., 2019; UNEP & CCAC, 2021).

Despite being described as a strategy relying on *individual* choices, however, the need for a global dietary change is hindered by some common narratives about food that have a relevant *social* dimension. Among them, the most entrenched and troublesome are those related to the idea of “freedom of choice” or “consumer autonomy” (Korthals, 2004; Kaplan, 2019), which have at their core the simple idea that humans should always be free to choose their foods. In Kaplan's words, “for any food issue, freedom to choose is always good and restrictions on choice are always bad” (2019: 42). In this framework, freedom of food choice is viewed as a sort of fundamental individual right that should be guaranteed in virtue of the importance of food in relation to health, religion, cultural identity, and personal autonomy.

The realisation of a shift from the actual diets, which for most developed countries have an extremely high environmental impact, to more sustainable ones, helpful in reaching mitigation targets, seems therefore to require an examination and change in the collective stories we tell about food and, especially, an adjustment of those narratives about our relationships with it. In this paper, after a brief analysis of the epistemology of narratives, I first suggest that freedom narratives about food are misleading because the right to food choice is conflated and confused with the right to adequate (quantity and quality of) food. Then, I show that freedom narratives are too narrow for at least two reasons: because they focus on the individual rights of some people forgetting those of the others, and because they lack contextual depth. Freedom narratives ignore the distant consequences in time and space of the fulfilment of the individual rights on which they focus, and do not include future generations or people living in less developed and privileged countries in their horizon of meaning. In defending the right of *some* individuals to freely choose specific food, freedom narratives contextually deny all the other individuals more fundamental rights, such as those to life, water, equality, health, and even the more basic right to adequate food.

Eventually, I suggest that novel and more appropriate narratives about food should be broader, encompassing individual, as well as *collective* rights (by which I simply mean the individual rights of *every* human being), and offering deeper knowledge about food production and its consequences on the environment. The formulation of new narratives about food can be a powerful strategy for climate mitigation, one that can be effective on multiple levels by providing a framework for personal engagement, facilitating the adoption of individual pro-environmental behaviour (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002), and encouraging – through the demands of citizens who have become more aware and engaged – the implementation of better policies for sustainable development in our communities.

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