Human-nature relations in the globalised food system: Does the convivial conservation approach serve to promote a more sustainable food system?



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Failure of the global food system and a sustainable nutrition

In the modern age, social sciences diagnosed an alienation between humans and nature (see e.g. Hinchliffe 2007), which is particularly acute for the global food

system. The separation of humans from food production is noticeable, especially in urban areas, which leads to environmental, social and health-harming food choices and subsequently to a failure of the global food system (Kasper et al. 2017).

In the last century, food production has become more globalised, more centralised, but also more efficient (Heinberg and Bomford 2009). The large-scale agribusiness in industrialised countries entail farming, production, and consumption practices that have vast impacts on the environment, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, soil degradation, water and air pollution, and resource loss due to food waste and excessive meat consumption (Heinberg and Bomford 2009; Herrero et al. 2021; Schutter et al. 2020a). The second failure of the food system can be referred to as an economic market failure (Schutter et al. 2020a). Large-scale agribusinesses and multinational food companies dominate the world food market due to low processing costs. Moreover, agribusinesses in industrialised countries get subsidised by the state which allows them to put even cheaper goods in the world market (Schoof et al. 2020). Smallholder farmers and food producers, especially in poorer nations, are less able to compete on the world market as they carry the double burden of higher production costs and low prices (Brunori and Galli 2016; Immovilli and Kok 2020). This tense economic situation of small-scale farmers partly leads to the third failure, namely poverty as well as under- and mal-nutrition (Schutter et al. 2020a). On the other hand, industrialised countries are trying to cope with the high prevalence of obesity and other diet-related diseases (Koerber et al. 2017; Schutter et al. 2020b). The fourth failure can be attributed to democracy: politics are not able to decide on long-term impacts as they only (can) think and act until the next elections (Piñeiro et al. 2020; Schutter et al. 2020b). Subsequently, they are focusing on 'repairing' acute food system failures instead of rethinking the entire system in a way that would include interregional as well as intergenerational effects as proposed in the definition of sustainability (Schutter 2019).

The framework of a sustainable nutrition by von Koerber et al. (2017) aims at creating such a system. It builds on the three dimensions of sustainability, namely economy, ecology, and society and is extended by the dimensions of health and culture (von Koerber et al 2017). According to that proposal, sustainable food is preferably ecologically produced under fair conditions for the producers; it should be plant-based, bought locally and according to the seasons, with a minimum of

packaging (ibid.). Such a proposal is great to support customers of the global north in finding their way through the vast range of offered food. Nevertheless, due to the market and governmental failures, it will not lead to a transformation of the global food system. Hence, a more holistic approach to the transformation of the food system is needed. Recently Bram Büscher and Rob Fletcher proposed convivial conservation (CC), which is such a radical approach for pluralistic conservation practices (Büscher and Fletcher 2019).

The convivial conservation approach (CC)

In accordance with Hinchliffe (2007), one main belief of CC is that human nature is not different from non-human nature and, thus, humans and nature should not be separated (Büscher and Fletcher 2019; Immovilli and Kok 2020). In that sense, CC proposes a conservation practice relying on a co-living (i.e. convivial) of human and non-human nature (Büscher and Fletcher 2019). Geographically speaking, this approach depicts rural and urban areas as working landscapes (Kremen and Merenlender 2018), meaning that landscapes and cities are intertwined in a way that any kind of nature is integrated into agricultural, rural, or urban areas (Immovilli and Kok 2020). Thus, this holistic conservation approach could be set up in any geographical space.

To this end, Büscher and Fletcher envision CC within five key aspects (2019):

- To overcome the human-nature dichotomy, we should move from protected to promoted areas, meaning that people should be encouraged to engage with nature, and thus be considered as welcomed visitors instead of invaders.
- Instead of saving nature from humans, which would exclude humans from nature and make them special, we should celebrate the differences and commons of both.
- Touristic voyeurism of nature has to be replaced by engaged and long-term visitation.
- Because of mainstream media, most people have this romanticised picture of nature being an untouched wild place. Hence, they do not recognize ‘everyday nature’ as nature anymore. Changing that perception would make people feel more responsible for local nature conservation and eventually activate pro-nature behaviours.
- Another important point calls for a common democratic engagement in

conservation practices instead of scientists and economists being the driving force of decision-making.

To implement these visions into practice, they say we need to deal with power-relations across different levels of governance and among civil society, and all actors should be included in conservation engagements. Moreover, they propose that structural change needs a two-step time frame to be implemented. Whereas short-term change can be described by concrete actions, long-term changes consist of strategic visions for a prosperous future. Both have to be enacted simultaneously to initiate and support structural changes (Büscher and Fletcher 2019).

A convivial conservation food system

Trying to separate the dimensions of a sustainable food system from each other is hardly possible, which illustrates the complexity of the food system. Consequently, an overarching strategy leading the way to a global sustainable food system is needed. The following elaborates whether the CC approach can be such a strategy by linking exemplary visions with issues of the global food system. Nevertheless, owing to the complexity, a one-to-one matching would be hardly expedient. Yet, Table 1 attempts to illustrate the overlap between the dimensions of sustainable nutrition and the visions of CC through concrete actions.

Table 1. This table illustrates the overlaps of sustainable nutrition and convivial conservation. *marks problems which both concepts try to tackle and ** marks actions, which were not elaborated within this article but would be interesting for further research (author own elaboration).

		Dimensions of Sustainable Nutrition				
		Economy	Ecology	Society	Health	Culture
Visions of Convivial Conservation	Promoted areas		**biodiversity loss, climate change, soil degradation***		conservation basic income	
		conservation basic income	biophilic cities & working landscapes		biophilic cities	biophilic cities
		agroforestry**	agroforestry**		agroforestry with fruit trees**	
	Celebrating human and non-human nature		**biodiversity loss, pollution, climate change***			
		ecological farming**	ecological farming**	rethinking nature	ecological farming*	rethinking nature
			human-wildlife coexistence	human-wildlife coexistence		human-wildlife coexistence
			community supported agriculture	community supported agriculture		
			agroecology**	reducing food waste**		reducing food waste**
	Engaged visitation	holidays on (small-scale) farms**		holidays on (small-scale) farms**	conservation basic income	urban gardening
				conservation basic income	communal eating**	
	Everyday environ-mentalism		urban gardening	rethinking nature	edible cities	rethinking nature
		city region food systems	conservation basic income	urban gardening	city region food systems	
	Democratic engagement	**poverty, inequity, monopolies***		**displacement, expropriation***	**hunger, obesity***	**inequality ***
		transparency, traceability	city region food systems	food as a commons**	right to food**	food sovereignity**
		collective decision-making	sharing knowledge	collective decision-making	collective decision-making	sharing knowledge
		sharing knowledge		historic reparations**	transparency, traceability	historic reparations**
		community supported agriculture		rethinking relations with corporations		education**
		rethinking relations with corporations		rethinking research		rethinking research
				transparency, traceability		(gender) equity**

One approach to promote the nature where our food comes from is the biophilic city framework (a biophilic city is one that is filled with diverse sights, sounds, smells, and textures; it is a city of deep sensory experiences). The biophilic city framework, highlights the benefits that nature brings into cities, including all scales within urban areas, from single buildings (e.g. green rooftops) to community (e.g. urban gardening) and regional levels (e.g. community-supported agriculture) (Beatley and Newman 2013). Biophilic cities are not only green cities but also motivate residents to directly engage with, learn about, and enjoy nature (Beatley and Newman 2013). In the global north, the biophilic city concept could create a more healthy food environment and thereby mitigate the prevalence of obesity and malnutrition (Schutter 2019; Schutter et al. 2020b). Additionally, by promoting (peri-)urban agriculture and conserving significant amounts of water, biophilic cities can make a difference in the food security of urban areas of the global south (Beatley and Newman 2013).

Democratic engagement, as proposed by Büscher and Fletcher (2019), relates to the dimensions of society, economy, and culture, too. Caniglia et al. (2021) refer to democratic knowledge as action-oriented knowledge, which can be attributed to individuals or groups that know how to take action to solve a certain problem.

Related to the food system could also involve knowledge about the local climate and environment, experimental and innovative farming practices, or heritage food processing. Action-oriented knowledge of the civil society should be made use of to accelerate a just food transition at a local level, whilst sharing it with different national, and international actors of different economic status, gender, age, and heritage could serve as a global catalyst (Pimbert 2017; Pantazis and Meyer 2020).

While pluralistic knowledge is vital, it alone will not lead to a more just food system. Political and economic changes need to be implemented throughout the entire society (Pimbert 2017). Adopting this thought on the globalised food system, influential stakeholders (e.g. governments, multinational corporations) should thus implement frameworks and regulations for a sustainable food system wherein citizens and businesses are free in their choices and actions at a local level.
That requires the empowerment of civil society. Empowered decision-making and acting depend on a certain amount of transparency and traceability on all stages of the food system (Brunori and Galli 2016; Regattieri et al. 2007). Political frameworks that make traceability a prerequisite for food producers and retailers (Regattieri et al. 2007) could thus facilitate individual choices and actions towards healthy food produced in an environmentally friendly and socially just way (Brunori and Galli 2016).

Concluding remarks

As shown throughout this discussion, the convivial conservation (CC) visions apply to the five dimensions of sustainable nutrition in one way or another. Moreover, implementing the visions of CC will most likely strengthen human-nature relations, and thus change the perception of natural food positively. Nevertheless, CC is still evolving and some of the offered visions and actions need to be implemented into practice to prove their efficacy. CC consists rather of a composition of already existing concepts, such as degrowth, agroecology, or food as a commons, which I have considered, but space did not permit a review here, and this article has merely touched on some aspects of the complex global food system. Its complexity requires a systemic approach for transformation towards a sustainable food system, although there is no blueprint solution for such. The CC approach can be seen as an overarching yet flexible strategy, a tool kit that contains all the necessary components for building a sustainable food system that

fits local characteristics.

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