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To cite this article: Isabel Baudish *et al* 2024 *Environ. Res. Lett.* **19** 084058

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ENVIRONMENTAL RESEARCH
LETTERS

LETTER

OPEN ACCESS

RECEIVED

15 November 2023

REVISED

8 March 2024

ACCEPTED FOR PUBLICATION

11 April 2024

PUBLISHED

6 August 2024

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Power & protein—closing the ‘justice gap’ for food system transformation

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E-mail: isabel.baudish@gmail.com**Keywords:** protein, transition, meat, food system, justice, transformation, political economy

Abstract

The protein shift, or transition, entails a reduction in the production and consumption of animal-source foods, and an increase in plant-based foods and alternative proteins, at a global level. The shift is primarily motivated by the need to minimise the impact of the food system on social-ecological systems. We argue that rather than focusing singularly on transitioning a ‘protein gap’ in diets, redressing the ‘justice gap’ is a prerequisite for transformative change in food systems. In this context the justice gap is understood as the gap delineating those who have access to just food systems and those who do not. To substantiate our argument a justice lens is used to analyse the political–economic dimensions of such a transformation and to propose that the future of protein must engage with three core elements to be transformative—disruption, innovation and redistribution. Disruption entails challenging both the food trends that encourage the ‘meatification’ of diets, and the influence of ‘Big Meat’ in perpetuating these trends. Innovation emphasises that true novelty is found by designing justice into practices and processes, rather than by firing alternative protein silver bullets within existing food system paradigms. Redistribution stresses that food system redesign is predicated upon establishing fair shares for remaining protein budgets, using approaches anchored in contextual specificity and positionality. Through the application of a justice framework, we expose existing food system injustices related to production and consumption of protein, invite discussion on how such injustices can be addressed and reflect on implications for food system transformations. By reshaping the crux of the protein debate around the more salient concern of the justice gap, food system transformation can take shape.

1. Introduction

Calls to transform the food system urgently resound across academic literature, policy directives, private sector agendas and non-governmental organisation (NGO) advocacy [1–6]. Food systems serve many overlapping functions fundamental to human and planetary health, providing basic human nutritional needs as well as sustaining vital coalitions of livelihoods, ecosystems and cultural practices. However, the global industrial food system that has emerged

over the last century is laden with a number of ‘aching points’ that compromise its ability to deliver these functions equitably, not least to the most vulnerable [7, p 20]. While global efforts to reduce malnutrition and food security have made significant progress, inroads have taken a turn for the worse in recent years [8]. It is ever apparent that the industrial food system serves commercial and trade interests at the expense of human and environmental health [2, 9] and, with the deeply rooted structural fragility of the food system exposed [10],

it is imperative that measures for transformation are adopted [3].

One aspect of food system transformation concerns drastically overhauling where dietary protein is sourced—a protein shift, or transition, away from animal-source foods⁷ (ASF) and towards plant-based foods and alternative proteins⁸ [9, 13–17]. This shift is chiefly driven by the high impact ASF currently imposes on social-ecological systems (box 1). In this paper we focus on terrestrial ASF (TASF)⁹ because there is significant commonality in the political-economic dynamics, sustainability challenges and substitutability in consumption. We acknowledge that different TASF also have distinct relations to social, environmental and economic contexts depending on what animal species are prevalent and how they are valued. Blue foods are beyond the scope of this article.

Box 1. Sustainability concerns warranting a shift away from terrestrial animal-source foods.

The environmental impact of terrestrial animal-source food products, in particular meat and dairy, is significantly larger than that of plant-based food products [6, 19–22]. Present food systems are estimated to be responsible for about one-third of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions [23, 24] with the livestock sector accounting for 14.5% of these [25]. Meat and dairy are calculated to be responsible for 60% of all agricultural GHG emissions, despite providing only 18% of calories and 37% of proteins globally [26]. On average, producing 100 g of protein from beef emits 25 kg of CO₂, while 100 g of protein from cheese, pork and poultry emit 8.4, 6.5 and 4.3 kg of CO₂ respectively. By comparison, tofu, beans and peas emit only 1.6, 0.7 and 0.4 kg of CO₂ per 100 g protein, respectively [27]. As well as the direct emissions from livestock, emissions are also generated as a consequence of the deforestation and land use change that takes place to graze livestock and cultivate crops for livestock feed [23, 28]. For example, the role that soy cultivation plays in deforestation has been well chronicled, and 77%

of soy production is used as animal feed [29]. In addition to climate impacts, other negative impacts from animal production include biodiversity loss stemming from deforestation and land use change [28], and the extensive use of fresh water in meat production [30].

There are also severe human health risks associated with the over-consumption of certain animal-based proteins (highly processed red meats and charcuterie products in particular), such as increased risk of cardiovascular disease and certain cancers [6, 31–34]. Livestock rearing is currently a driver of antimicrobial resistance [35, 36], and future effects of this for human health care systems and animal production are difficult to foresee. But as the COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated, humans and animals are not separate, and the spread of zoonotic diseases is of major personal and societal concern. Human health risks also extend to the impact felt by those working to produce TASF and the associated feedstocks. Many farmers, for example, face increasing economic hardship, loss of livelihoods, and political marginalisation which contribute to mental health issues, including loneliness and increased suicide rates [37–41]. Slaughterhouse workers are found to have a high prevalence of depression and anxiety, and some evidence suggests a correlation between slaughterhouse employment and crime perpetration [42, 43].

Changing modes of consuming and producing protein is challenging, with an ensuite of associated social, economic, ecological and health interconnections. The extent to which these interconnections exist varies with species, scale and region. Livestock play a number of roles [44], generating diverse ecosystem benefits and representing an important socio-cultural heritage [45, 46]. The livestock sector provides for millions of smallholder livelihoods, generating approximately 20%–25% of agricultural gross domestic product (GDP) in low- and middle-income countries [47]. TASF provides a concentrated source of important vitamins, complex amino acids and minerals, with modest increases in consumption offering significant health benefits to the nutritionally vulnerable [48–50]. As climate change will likely reduce the availability of proteins found in wheat and rice—major sources of protein intake for most people around the world—this deficiency will have to be compensated [51].

Oversimplification and imbalance plague the conceptualisation of protein shifts and flattens complexity [52]. Both the arguments supporting *and* critiquing the use of TASF can lack nuance and complete data, omit facts that undermine positions,

⁷ ASF refers to dairy products, meat, blue foods (excluding algae and seaweed), and eggs [9, 11, 12]. This definition excludes the lab-grown versions of these products.

⁸ Alternative proteins include (but are not limited to) novel plant-based protein substitutes (also known as meat mimics and analogues), lab-grown proteins (also known as cultured and cellular proteins) and processed insect derived products. Traditional plant-based protein preparations (such as tofu and seitan), whole foods emulating meat (such as jackfruit and mushrooms) and traditional insect consumption are excluded from the scope of this term [9].

⁹ TASF includes all food products obtained from terrestrial animals at various scales, from mammals, birds and insects alike [18].

and focus on challenging opponent integrity as the primary way to win a debate [53]. Too often is the protein shift couched in binary terms and positionalities, presented as a polarised struggle between dominant and alternative food systems, such as meat-eaters vs. vegans, or intensive corporate farming vs. agroecology [54–56]. Different animals are often reduced to their function as meat, different meats are morphed together and the extent to which meats are processed is often not transparent to consumers. A rather singular concept of protein is the result, setting up a tunnel visioned political and cultural debate [9].

Discourses on protein shifts have also been dominated by a central and misleading narrative of a ‘protein gap’ that needs to be closed—i.e. there is a global protein deficiency that warrants increased and diversified production [9, 15, 57, 58]. This reductive message is deeply intertwined with the political, economic and cultural role of TASF [59]. The high pedestal that protein is placed on undercuts the relevance of micronutrients and other macronutrients, while the debate on ‘the future of protein’ often obscures the complex context of broader food system transformations. Echoing the Great Protein Fiasco¹⁰ of the 1930s, hyper-fixation on a ‘protein gap’ within nutrition agendas can omit the more critical aspects of food access and poverty [60] and ignore the reality that the majority of adults in high- and middle-income economies, in fact, consume substantially more than the daily recommendations for protein intake [61]. ‘Exploring other possibilities for framing the problem is an essential first step’ in enabling food system transformation [57, p 393] and this paper sets out to do just that.

Here, we argue that to enable a food system *transformation* (over a protein shift or transition), a focus is instead needed on the ‘justice gap’ in food systems, where there is less emphasis on substituting protein sources, and more focus on the equitable redistribution of food, including protein as a key nutrient. We conceptualise transformation to mean not only changing diets, but also fundamentally contesting the deep-seated form and functions of protein within the global food system [62, 63]. Changing protein is more complicated than a silver bullet approach precariously balanced on techno-optimism, or an expectation that the meat industry will regulate itself [9]. Rather, it involves large-scale structural changes spanning politics, economy and socio-cultural norms [64]. By invoking the term ‘justice gap’ (where the gap refers to delineating those who have access to just food systems and those who do not), we point to the number of injustices that are

manifest within food systems—such as malnourishment, human rights abuses, (child) exploitation, marginalisation and, oppression. We propose a vision of a just food system that can provide equitable access to sufficient and healthy food for all, within Earth system boundaries [65]. A just food system also invites safe and equitable participation in the ownership and governance of the means of producing, distributing and consuming food [66]. We position this paper in the understanding that justice is vital both inherently as a process (i.e. justice for justice’s sake) and the explicit outcomes a justice approach produces. Food system justice¹¹ has many intersections with environmental justice, racial justice and human rights approaches, as well as feminist and decolonial scholarship [68–70].

To conduct our analysis, we draw on the three lenses of historical, representational and distributional justice, as proposed in [5] as a framework for examining justice in food system transformation. Historical justice is concerned with how injustices may be carried over and reproduced within transformations [5]. Representational justice is interested in how different perspectives are represented within the transformation, interrogating institutionalised barriers that limit social, economic and political participation, and opening up for citizen input [71]. Distributional justice interrogates how benefits and risks are shared amidst competing needs [72]. Using these three lenses, we propose three core approaches—disruption, innovation and redistribution—needed to close the ‘justice gap’ and enable a food system transformation encompassing, but not pigeonholed to, protein (figure 1). Our paper discusses system reconfigurations, but recognises the feasibility challenges inherent in confronting systems of power. Justice is also normative, positional and ‘malleable’ by nature [73, p 2]—these lenses offer up a justice perspective, not a definitive one. Our study’s subsequent contribution lies in offering conceptual avenues and illustrative examples to refocus the debate on the relationship between protein, justice and food system transformation.

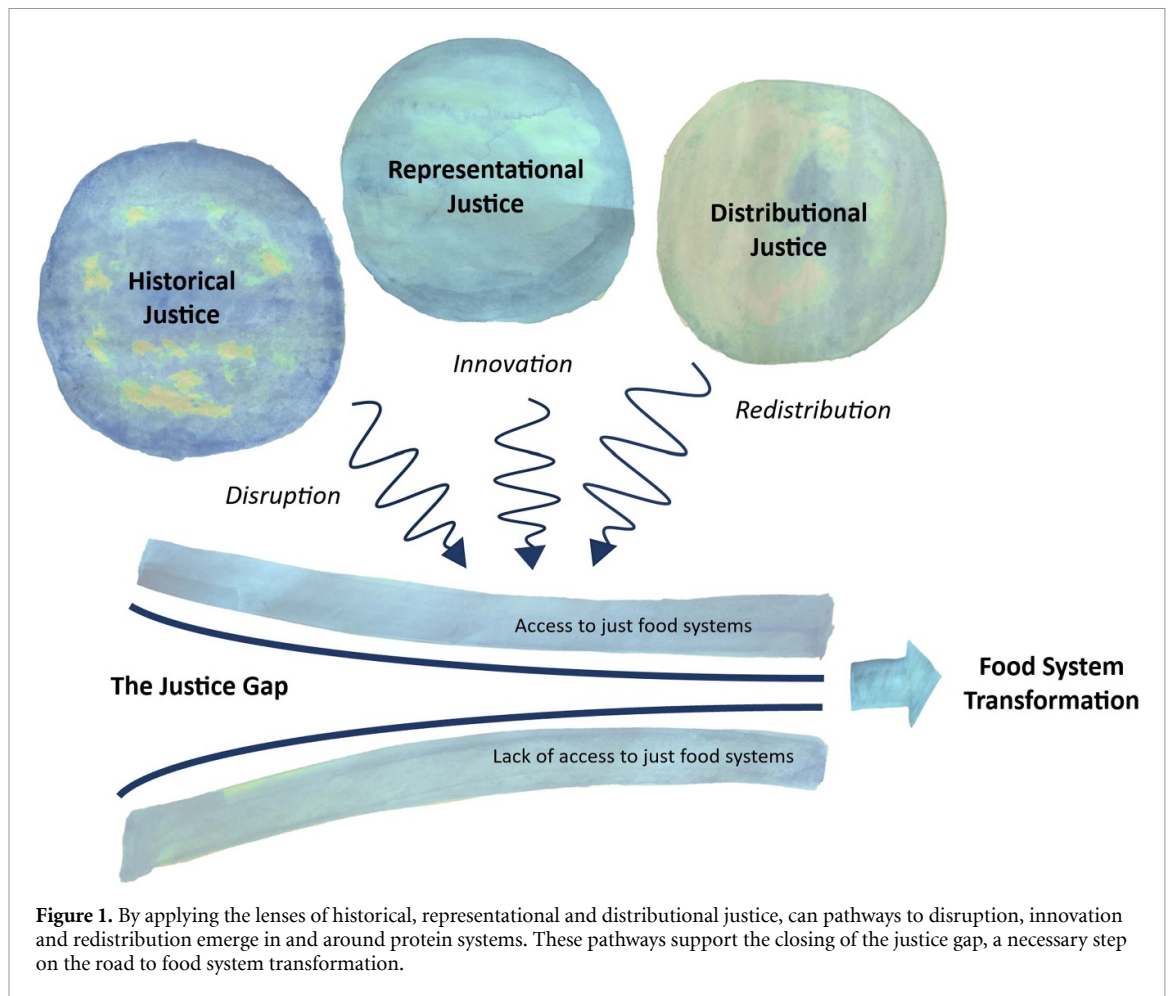
2. Disruption

2.1. The ‘meatification’ of diets and rise of ‘Big Meat’

The growing influence of ‘Big Meat’ in the global food system is observable throughout several historical food regimes (figure 2 [74, 75]). Within the third and current regime, an integrated ‘industrial grain–oilseed–livestock complex’ [76, p 65] successfully

¹⁰ The Great Protein Fiasco of the 1930s pinned malnutrition in Africa on the back of protein deficiency, with it only later unfurling that food access and poverty were the more critical issues at hand [60].

¹¹ Justice in food system transformations is gathering increased attention. The second EAT–Lancet commission has an increased focus on food justice [67], and the 2023 Earth Systems boundaries report introduced a justice floor to mirror the planetary boundary ceilings [65].



continues to reinforce the ‘meatification’ or ‘westernisation’ of diets [77, p 20]. In 2019 the total global production of meat amounted to over 300 million tonnes (in slaughter weight), a near five-fold increase since 1961 [78], while the population has ‘only’ increased nearly three-fold in the same period¹². This dietary shift is still accelerating [80], and spreading to low- and middle-income countries [81] contributing to the triple burden of malnutrition¹³ [8, 82].

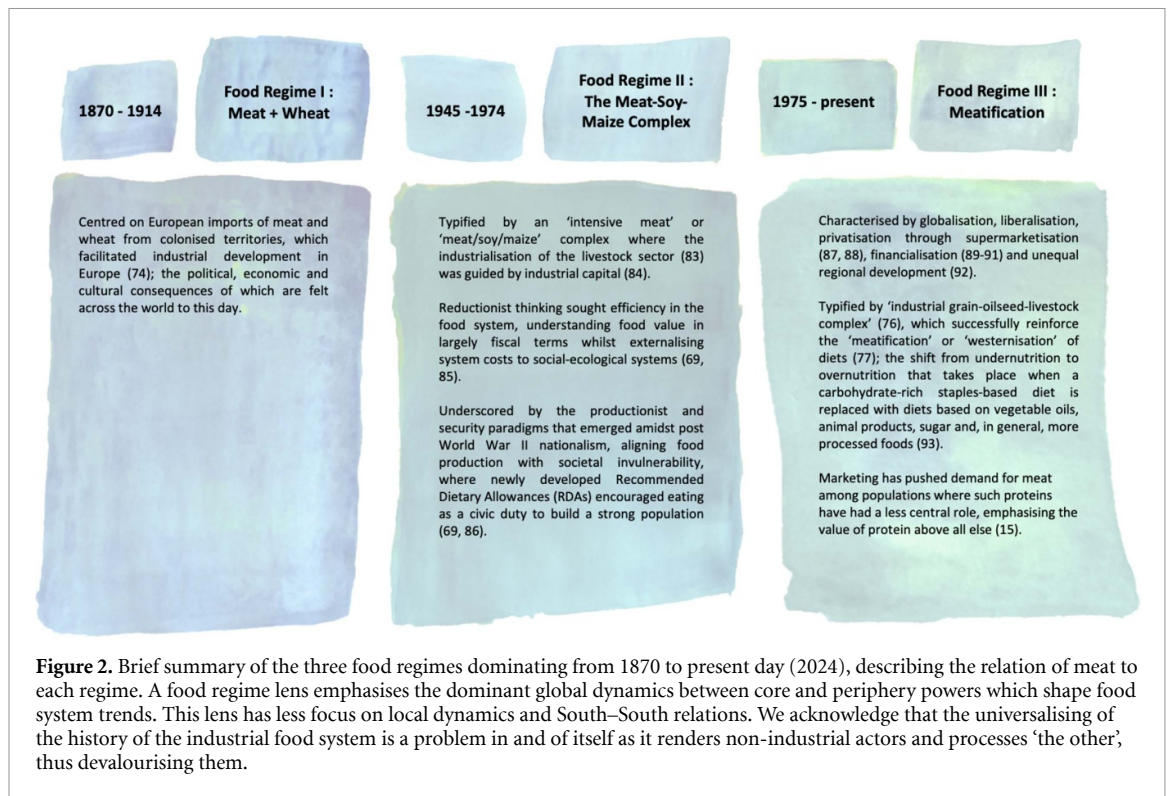
Industrialised meat production in the current regime is largely driven by the ‘imperatives of capital’ and not by the ambition to produce nutritious food [92, p 94]. Companies, following shareholder pressure, have focused on encouraging production and sales of highly processed, low-quality food with higher price margins [15, 91]. This has often been underpinned by strategies to de-skill both consumers (slowly eroding food preparation knowledge and encouraging heightening reliance on processed foods), and farmers (increasing dependency

on upstream and downstream intermediaries, such as animal geneticists/breeders and meat processors) [94]. Increased demand for meat (particularly pork and poultry) has led to the use of more capital-intensive technologies by farmers, and their vertical integration in agro-food industries that aim for standardised (meat) products [95–97]. As of today, over 50% of the total global TASF production occurs within broiler systems, intermediately or fully industrialised meat systems, in feedlots or in specialised layer systems [98]. Only 15% is produced in ‘backyard’ or grass-based systems [98]. Even though there is immense diversity of production within categorisations such as ‘industrial’ and ‘grass-based’, these numbers highlight the dominance of production systems characterised by market—orientation, rationalisation and economies of scale. Smallholder producers, for example, are often seen as being captured by the agro-food industry where ‘technological choices combined with economic choices and cultural evolutions strengthen the dominance of the largest actors’ [99, p 19].

Consolidation in the food system is occurring vertically (the acquisition of upstream and downstream businesses), horizontally (merging or acquiring competitors), geographically (entering new regional markets) and concentrically (entering adjacent

¹² In 1960, the global population was around 3 billion people, while it is currently nearly 8: a 2.6 fold increase [79].

¹³ The triple burden of malnutrition refers to the concurrent dimensions of undernourishment, micronutrient deficiencies, and over-nutrition [82].



industries) across the supply of seed, agrichemical, fertilisers and machinery [2, 15, 100]. Currently, the global ‘protein pie’ is a USD 1.5 trillion sector [101] and both capital and control are highly concentrated [102]. The top ten meat processing companies control 75%, 70% and 53% of the slaughter of beef, pork and chicken respectively. Breeding stock is even more tightly controlled, with seven dominant companies [9]. This agglomeration bears witness to the rise of ‘Big Meat’ at the expense of other small-scale stakeholders across the food system—packagers, breeders, farmers and processors—and also of public, animal and ecosystem health [102]. In the majority of cases, farmers and consumers are excluded from core decision making around farming and diets [103], undermining participation, agency, freedoms—and hence justice [104]. When price increases occur, they are not merely being driven by rising input costs or supply/demand dynamics, but rather ‘the result of corporate decisions to take advantage of their market power in an uncompetitive market, to the detriment of consumers, farmers and ranchers, and our economy’ [105].

2.2. Pathways for disruption

Disruption entails challenging both the food trends that encourage the ‘meatification’ of diets, and the influence of ‘Big Meat’ in perpetuating these trends. A historical justice lens draws attention to how deep-seated inequalities, experienced over time, replicate in current trajectories, offering insight on where to disrupt such patterns [5]. The economic interests

of ‘Big Meat’ continually act to retain power, visible in the ramped investment in alternative proteins [15, 53], resistance to initiatives that seek to disrupt market grip [77, 106, 107] and, similar to the tobacco and fossil fuel industries, the push back ‘against evidence that its product caused harm’ [108, p 25]. ‘Big Meat’ and the privatised food sector have come to wield an undue amount of power from a representational justice perspective. This influence has time and again been correlated with food policy stagnation [108, 109] and should be challenged for its inherent and instrumental impact on widening the justice gap. To create the necessary space for change, industry self-regulation cannot be relied upon [109] and ‘politically-inspired regime destabilisation may be necessary’ [110, p 37].

Given that power is manifested largely in the form of capital [53, 74, 83, 111], pathways for disruption will likely be a complex and context specific combination of various financial interventions to interrupt profit streams, such as taxation and removal of meat subsidies. Nation states and government subsidies have facilitated the dominant role of private corporations in food systems through, for example, ‘direct ownership stakes, payments or tax breaks for production, low-interest funds to finance acquisitions, policies that shift the burden of environmental and community impacts of their operations to taxpayers, and regulatory barriers that disadvantage competing firms’ [102, p 32]. Discrepancies in taxation also reflect outdated regulatory environments—for example, at least six EU

states¹⁴ have a higher value-added tax rate for mylks¹⁵ in comparison to dairy [112]. Subsidies also typically favour dominant firms, thereby increasing opportunities for market concentration [102]—seen in the case of feed subsidies benefiting the broiler industry [114] and the Brazilian meat complex [115]. Eliminating harmful subsidies, using mechanisms under the remit of the World Trade Organisation, would target such concentration and offer co-benefits [116, 117]. Pluralist science–policy interfaces for food systems governance, based on the Intergovernmental Science–Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) or High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE-FSN) models, could also be approaches to guard against corporate influence [118].

Additional regulatory interventions are called for, such as restrictions on industry monopolisation, and antitrust and consumer legislation to target anti-competitive behaviours that are driving down wages for workers and prices for farmers, while raising consumer prices [9, 15]. Key meat processors—Hormel, Tyson and JBS—have been historically associated with the latter, with JBS receiving a USD 3.2 billion corruption fine in 2017 [15]. From 2001 to 2018, 52% and 32% respectively of the credit received by the soy and cattle traders active in the Brazilian Amazon came from secrecy jurisdiction or tax havens [119, 120]. As well as this, lobbying activities, including the provision of financial incentives to politicians and the push for pro-meat policies, are well documented within the TASF industry [54, 103, 108, 121–126]. Stronger lobbying regulation is one prospective counter to this, including disclosure and auditing requirements, preventative measures to manage conflict of interest and revolving door practices, and a coherent suite of transparency and integrity mechanisms [127].

Disrupting the centrality of TASF within diets also requires tackling the pervasive nature of protein norms across diverse cultural contexts. Meat, historically, has a social status that has been interwoven with culture, identity and systems of power, including patriarchy and neoliberalism [59]. For example, underscoring mid-20th century Western rationing policies was the perception that women were ‘incapable’ of handling too much meat, driving an encouragement to go without, and making ‘explicit the role meat has played as an enduring symbol of masculinity and racial/national superiority’ [59, p 14]. The meat–masculinity connection continues into the 21st century, with the cultural power of meat used in media to emphasise traditional gender roles [128, 129]. Even alternatives to meat can be framed both

as a threat to performing manhood [130] or a way to reproduce traditional masculinity [131], indicating that the (patriarchal) gendering of food must be disrupted to pave the way for just dietary cultures that are not grounded in systems of oppression. The links between other forms of cultural power and TASF should also be interrogated. The restrictions on eggs in Indian school lunches (often going against nutritional advice) exemplify the role of religion and politics (and ‘caste and class’) in influencing food systems, where control is upheld by ‘those who have a stake in the system’ [132, p 87].

By drawing on a historical justice lens and seeking inspiration in feminist, degrowth and decolonial thinking [66, 133, 134], we can recast the mould of meat norms so that evolving cultural practices are not shaped by ‘patriarchal traditions nor by the perverse incentives of industrial food systems’ [9, p 48]. Disruption pathways must run deep, for the injustice(s) of hegemonic agri-food systems are ingrained within both the ‘imaginaries of how economies and societies should work’ and ‘the political–economic structures that uphold and reproduce these imaginaries’ [133, p 1590]. Disrupting the stranglehold of meat is therefore entangled with disrupting the inner workings of power in food systems. In the wake of disruption there is space for uncertainty to flourish, and for novelty to emerge [135].

3. Innovation

3.1. Fresh meat or more of the same?

There is significant hype around the potential of innovative proteins. The protein gap provides a highly saleable narrative that brings consumers and investors alike to the table. *Product* innovation is emphasised, characterising the protein gap as bridgeable by R&D and investment [57, 136]. Alternative proteins are typically promoted on the basis of health and goodness for humans, non-humans and the planet [17], analogous taste to ASF [137–140] with minimal negative externalities [136]. Markets within both the Global North and the Global South are targeted, the latter by stories of a golden opportunity to leapfrog to an optimised system that does not reproduce the challenges of the western, meatified food system [141, 142].

Established food companies, including ‘Big Meat’, are raising the scope and scale of their activities across the alternative protein sector [26], driving corporatisation of the sector, aka ‘Big Veganism’ [143]. Activities include developing alternative proteins, acquisition of alternative protein businesses and investment in start-ups [26]. Nearly all significant meat and dairy manufacturers now have assets in alternative proteins [9], extending their social licence and power within the ‘protein’ industry. JBS, for example, now owns 100 protein brands globally [102], and the monopolisation entrenches power

¹⁴ As of 2019 these were Greece, Austria, Slovakia, Spain, Germany and Italy [112].

¹⁵ The term ‘mylk’ refers to plant-based milk analogues, distinct from those made from dairy [113].

asymmetries, as well as hollowing out the original commitments of alternative proteins to sustainability [100]. These investment activities are frequently mired in obfuscation making it difficult for anyone to ‘meaningfully assess’ the promises and consequences underpinning new products [136, p 1583].

Patterns of corporate concentration are mirrored in the financialisation of food, including the ‘innovative’ (and lucrative) alternative protein sector which attracts non-food actors such as pension and private equity funds [91, 144, 145]. For example, Vanguard and Blackrock have investments in many of the largest firms in the meat, dairy and animal feed sector, and are now buying into alternative protein product development [9, 146], alongside billionaires like Bill Gates and Richard Branson [17, 147]. R&D ventures in alternative proteins have largely been within the private sector rather than university settings, and often adopting the business models typified by Big Tech and the Silicon Valley [17]. Financialisation undermines sustainable food systems on multiple fronts, squeezing smallholders’ income, reducing farmer independence and increasing environmental risks through both intensification of production and expansion into natural landscapes [100].

Novel foods perpetuation of hegemonic norms should not be underestimated. While veganism can sometimes be positioned as political (i.e. a means of resisting capitalist, patriarchal or colonial oppressors [9, 59]), this is not inherently the case. All too often, alternative food system enthusiasts do not ‘embrace concepts of social justice or food sovereignty in their discourse and practice’ [148, p 199]. Consumers can, for example, be encouraged to care about the planet and health by buying alternative mylk products, but are ultimately only granted agency within the neoliberal bind, remaining ‘consumers of commodity food’ [113, p 945]. Claims of alternativeness and innovation, within the guise of clever marketing, mask that such green consumer products do not fall far from the capitalist tree [149]. Case in point, many mylks are often purchased in addition to dairy, rather than as a like-for-like substitute [150]. When corporate control of alternative foods prevail, food choices are largely depoliticised, risking foreclosure on ‘other potential pathways of food system change’ [113, p 958]. As systemic problems are individualised, market mechanisms are pushed as the solution and the ‘political economy of industrial agriculture’ endures [113, p 945].

Equating the concept of innovation within new products and technology often sees the class, racial and gendered dimensions of food systems neglected [151, 152]. Western vegan food culture is frequently framed as the healthy and moral choice, fuelling the alignment of veganism with affluence and whiteness [152, 153]. This in turn constructs the ‘unhealthy other’ [154, p 1348, 155] a stigma

saddled to the backs of ‘the poor, the colonised, and conquered’ as ‘evidence of their immorality’ [66, p 102], used to deny their rights and dignity further [156]. While there is potential for diets which include alternative proteins to facilitate emergent gender norms outside of the meat–masculinity complex [157], vegan narratives online currently have limited space for ‘alternative gender performativity’ and can reproduce the same patriarchal patterns as TASF [131, p 133]. There remains a proclivity towards vegan ‘hyper-masculinities’ [130] and the restrictive eating cultures that have long exercised control shaming (particularly) female and larger bodies [158]. When introduced to novel settings, indigenous foods may offer an ‘innovation’ opportunity with benefits for ‘agro-biodiversity, farming system diversity and dietary diversity’ [159, p 100]. However, positive outcomes rely on accompanying measures protecting against food system injustice. Traditional protein-rich crops turned ‘superfoods,’ such as quinoa, flow from Global South to North leaving behind a slew of problems connected to excessive land clearing, reduced domestic food security and boom–bust conditions for farmers [160, 161]. On top of this, traditional insect-reliant diets have been appropriated and commercialised by corporate actors without due acknowledgement or sharing of benefits [162, 163].

3.2. Pathways for innovation

To close the justice gap, technological innovation must avoid being co-opted by incumbent actors and giving incumbent companies the opportunity to steer the debate and governance arena. Setting clearly defined regulatory parameters, for example, would help evaluate new protein technologies and whether or not they align with a public good [9]. Reflexive protocols should be attentive to contextual specificity; not all alternatives are created equal nor are they all necessarily sustainable or more ethical [136, 164–166]. Elevating actors that are truly attentive to sustainability across value chains is paramount as such social innovations challenge key routines, institutions and beliefs and are key for broader systemic change [15, 167–169]. For novel foods, this could entail increased transparency [170] and the open sourcing of intellectual property [136]. For TASF, innovation could be reducing the emission intensity of rearing livestock [171–173], or looking to tradition for the future, such as re-coupling animal rearing and landscapes, contributing to the un-making of the industrial meat regime [174, 175]. Justice can also be embedded relationally in food systems via the ‘cultivation and celebration of meaningful food’ [148, p 199]. Box 2 suggests different ways of relating to food with the intent of stretching ‘understanding of what it means to grow and eat food justly’ [148, p 199].

Box 2. Rebuilding meaningful food.

Meaningful food is one possible avenue for understanding what innovative approaches to food could look like, moving beyond food as a commodity and instead aiming to foster, build and strengthen relational food [148]. Innovation founded in justice becomes less about matching problems with singular solutions, and instead expanding ideas of food practices and relations. During the 2022 event ‘Healing Our Connection with Food in the Fake Food Era’, food sovereignty advocate Vandana Shiva captured this sentiment forthwith:

‘Our movement has to be founded on the awareness that eating is an ecological act, and join hands with the Earth, and with the farmer as one unity. Therefore, the pattern of big farms with big money, and big investors wanting to extract more from the Earth, needs to be reverted in favour of a return to a culture of care that provides dignity to farmers who produce real food to feed the world’ [176].

A few existing illustrative examples centred around meaningful food are:

- The Slow Food movement with its view of consumers as co-producers, heralding ‘good, clean and fair’ food alongside convivial relations throughout the food system [177].
- The Via Campesina, a small-scale farmer led, grassroots movement ‘aiming for family farming to promote social justice and dignity’ [168, p 3].
- The recognition of agroecology as not only a science, but also a ‘movement and a practice’, with the latter being closely intertwined with equity struggles for example in Latin America [178, p 503].
- Pastoralism, through its tightly woven human–livestock interactions within biocultural landscapes, reflects where meaningful and innovative approaches to TASFs may be sought in tradition. Painting all livestock production with the same brush as ‘the problem’ has the potential further to marginalise some livestock farmers, especially pastoralists, who are contributing to the wellbeing of people and nature [179–182].

Beyond product innovation, there is a crucial need for innovation of *process* and food system governance to enhance diversity and combat power

concentration [1, 100]. Given the number of different trade-offs and actor heterogeneity this will be no mean feat, with any framework that diminishes food system complexity either ‘hopelessly naive or radically incomplete’ [183, p 443]. As a foundational point of departure though, representational justice highlights who speaks for whom, power dynamics, systems of control and collective decision making [184, 185]. Often those most affected by the food system injustice given ‘little influence in decision-making processes’ [73]. Pluralistic inclusion is often, explicitly and implicitly, absent as an objective within major protocols for food system transformation [186]. Such absence must be corrected in a manner that steps beyond limited consultation [187] or only a seat at the table. Co-production processes that reproduce unequal power relations may do ‘more harm than good’ [188, p 1095] and risk pinning transformation of food systems on the ‘backs of the rural poor’ [186, p 729]. Instead, inclusion demands actual engagement (being heard at the table) with a balanced range of human and non-human perspectives [5, 9, 118, 189]. Deliberative democracy models such as citizen assemblies are potential vehicles to empower citizens and diverse food system actors—consumers, processors, retailers, vendors, transporters, producers alike—to formulate decisions along common interests [183].

As of now, deeply rooted issues of political economy prevent the formulation of pluralist visions for food system transformation [190]. Adopting processes that foreground relationality [69] and operate intersectionally can help to consider by who, and for whom, protein transformations are being imagined and what ‘senses of justice’ are included [191]. Food sovereignty frameworks by design support inclusion and ‘autonomous struggles for the exercise of entitlements to land and community-based decision making, along with democratic and participatory control over our local natural assets’ [148, p 216]. By first unpacking the ‘matrix of oppressions’—patriarchy, capitalism and colonialism—just alternatives to the corporate industrial food system can emerge that resist the allure of silver bullet solutions [192, p 1029]. Therein lies the true novelty of novel foods.

4. Redistribution

4.1. Unfair portions of the multi-layered protein pie

Applied to food systems, distributional justice is concerned with the fair allocation of risks, impacts, opportunities and benefits within the food system—all of which are presently unevenly shared across nations and various subpopulations [5]. It is now apparent that a universal dietary ‘protein gap’ is a misnomer. In 2020, the total global supply of protein was equal to ~85 g per capita per day [193] (far outweighing the average person’s daily need

(~50–60 g) [6, 194]). Simultaneously consumption is highly unevenly distributed and significant protein deficiencies do still persist in specific populations because of poverty¹⁶ and lack of access. Consumers in high-income countries eat nearly twice as much protein in total compared to consumers in low-income countries (104 compared to 58 g of protein per capita per day) and their meat share of dietary protein is five times higher (30% compared to 6%) [194]. These inequities are visible throughout modern history. In 1961, the supply of protein in the EU was ~87 g per capita per day, while in those countries classified as ‘Least Developed’, the supply was ~49 g [195].

The social-ecological impacts of TASF are often externalised and unequally distributed. Global markets birthed out of colonial legacies contribute to ‘pastureland exploitation in one country (creating TASF that are) used and consumed in another’ [196, p 2]. Developing countries have historically contributed very little to the demand driving greenhouse gas emissions associated with meat production, yet they are expected to bear heavier burdens in terms of impacts of climate change and land use change. For example, the EU, the USA, China and Japan (home to ~30% of the global population), are responsible for over 50% of the exploitation of the world’s grazing lands [196]. Eighteen of the 30 supply chains encompassing this land use are cattle related, which ‘confirm[s] the exacerbation of global inequality due to livestock consumption’ [196, p 6]. The disproportionate distribution of benefits and costs between groups and regions are also observable when considering differing labour conditions, resource ownership, livelihoods and capacity to participate in decision-making processes [73].

The politics of protein distribution are intersectional. Communities of colour and the poor are often denied access to participating in the ‘diet advocated by the food movement’ across the various activities of the food system [197, p 5]. Gender is moreover one of the ‘strongest and most consistent predictors’ for beef intake [198, p 8], with the result ‘unsurprisingly always the same: men eat more meat than women do’ [199, p 2809]. A recent USA based study found half of all beef consumed could be attributed to 12% of individuals, with female, older and African-Americans typically falling within the lower consumption bracket [198]. Women face heightened nutritional deficiencies and food insecurity, particularly during pregnancy and breastfeeding [200]. This gender disparity is also seen in ownership and labour patterns concerning TASF, particularly in the

Global South [201]. Women are the backbone of the food systems’ triad of production, distribution and consumption [85], and two thirds of the world’s 600 million poor livestock keepers are female [202]. However, this involvement ‘does not correlate with their control over use of products or decision making regarding management or sale’ [203, p 266]. For example, women may have the right to sell cattle milk on paper, but not have rights to its associated earnings [204] or decision-making powers concerning the herd and household [205]. For justice to prevail the full rights of vulnerable groups must be being protected for justice to prevail.

4.2. Pathways to redistribution

A key dimension of closing the justice gap lies in redistribution within food systems, including protein as a key nutrient. Distributional justice has strong intersections with human rights and basic needs—every individual should have access to food that is safe, healthy, culturally appropriate, produced under fair labour conditions, avoids environmental harms and is sufficient to meet their dietary requirements [72, 206]. The rights of one person cannot be allowed to jeopardise the needs of others. There is an inherent boundary when needs satisfaction becomes luxury, and this applies to the ‘need’ for meat/protein [129, 130].

There are clearly many philosophical and pragmatic questions that are associated with establishing fair sharing of risks and burdens in food systems—what is the environmental budget for food production, what is the minimum fair share, and what measures could be implemented to tangibly protect this? Consumption corridors are one mechanism that could be used to seek to equitably distribute TASFs across groups. A consumption corridor refers to the optimal space between a maximum (ceiling) (such as the planetary boundaries [207] or livestock sustainability limits [208–210]) and minimum (floor) consumption levels (based on justice thresholds [65]). The optimal space should allow ‘everybody to satisfy their needs without compromising others’ ability to meet their own’ [211, p 1]. Consumption corridors are typically negotiated using deliberative democracy processes [211, 212]. They offer potential as strong governance tools that can place caps on consumption that can ‘bring about absolute reductions in the negative impacts of consumption in a just manner’ [212, p 619]. Establishing regional fair shares within the remaining corridor could in turn be based on different methods: grandfathering (proportional to contribution to environmental impact), ability to pay (proportional to GDP per capita), or per capita (proportional to population) [213]. These methods echo the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Paris Agreement’s central tenet of ‘common but differentiated responsibility’ [214],

¹⁶ Poverty can be understood here as a number of compounding and interlinked dimensions, including but not limited to monetary poverty (where certain foods are rendered unaffordable for lower income groups) and time poverty (where the burdens of unpaid work may limit the time available to prepare and consume certain foods).

where high consuming groups must make drastic reductions to make room for others.

This unequal allocation of risk and benefits associated with protein is increasingly recognised at a high level but must be strengthened [34, 215]. There remains strong reluctance to implement policy tools to steer diets, let alone cap current overconsumption of protein and meat [216]. Demand for meat is expected to increase across the board, even in high-income regions [173, 217, 218]. The effectiveness of multilateral measures to reduce this demand still have much to prove—*The Global Methane Pledge*¹⁷ for example, is limited by its reliance on voluntary measures and its scope does not encompass consumption. Pathways to transformation cannot exist before existing distributional injustices are duly recognised and acted upon by regulators, investors and big business. Attention should be paid to the diverse range of social inequalities experienced by marginalised groups propping up the current food system [5]. Too often the very ‘subjects of justice’¹⁸ are not specifically identified within conceptualisations of transformation [73, p 14] and rendered invisible in policy documents [220].

5. Conclusion

Food system transformation predicated on justice is a crucial step towards articulating the systemic changes needed around protein consumption and production. When considering how to set the table for change, we must disrupt the existing set up, not only rethinking the plate but also considering who serves and who dines at the table, who benefits from the arrangement, who is left out, and who goes hungry. By using the proposed framework in combination with other justice-centred approaches, the protein discourse can be realigned. This creates space to develop context-specific strategies correcting injustices and for the justice gap in food systems to close.

Data availability statement

No new data were created or analysed in this study.

Acknowledgments

This article used the work of L B, C B, P O and H P in the unpublished report *Protein Transitions Beyond the Political Economy: the Case of the Netherlands* as a starting point. Thank you also to colleagues

in the protein, grazing and transformation discussion groups at the Stockholm Resilience Centre, and the Justice working group of the EAT-Lancet 2.0 Commission for enriching our shared thinking around protein, transformation and justice.

Funding

I B and L P acknowledge the IKEA Foundation Grant No. G-1910-01412, ‘A visionary agenda for transforming the food system’. K R S acknowledges the support of the Swedish Research Council for Environment, Agricultural Sciences and Spatial Planning Grant No. 2019-00403. L B, C B, P O and H P acknowledge the support of the Policy Institution and Market small grant on ‘Food system transformation—Beyond the political economy of protein transition’ allotted to the CIAT International Center for Tropical Agriculture under the program CGIAR Research Program: Policies, Institutions, and Markets, led by IFPRI. C B acknowledges the support of the Sustainable and Healthy Diet through Food System Transformation (SHiFT) initiative funded under CGIAR. Any opinion expressed here belong to the authors.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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¹⁷ The Global Methane Pledge is the existing international governance framework for methane emission reductions, and highly associated with TASF production [219].

¹⁸ [73] proposes that the key ‘subjects of justice’ to consider are ‘those with a particular role in the food system including producers and consumers, people who are marginalised, Indigenous communities, those with experiences of negative consequences of the food system, future generations, and nonhumans’.

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