From wet markets to Wal-Marts: tracing alimentary xenophobia in the time of COVID-19

COVID-19 has spread beyond China at lightning speed. Fear-based responses have moved even faster. Before we knew the term ‘social distancing’, Asian restaurants around the world saw a drop in clientele (Yeung 2020) and Asian people a rise in harassment (Yan et al. 2020). This fear of a marked group of people and their food fuels more than individual incidents. We argue that such alimentary xenophobia also leads to calls to eliminate foreign foodways without considering their social, economic and gastronomic values. Subtly embedded in these calls is the presumed superiority of industrialised, corporate foodways.

The novel coronavirus likely first appeared at an open-air wet market in Wuhan, China, where meat was sold alongside live animals in conditions conducive to zoonotic viral transmission (Brulliard 2020; Woo et al. 2006). Many have called for the immediate closure of wet markets, reflecting the urgent need to change animal procurement, transport and slaughter practices (Blakeman 2020; Forgey 2020). These ‘calls to close’, however, homogenise heterogeneous markets around the world, painting them as universally dangerous instead of recognising specific practices within them as predictable catalysts for preventable disease. They also fail to recognise wet markets’ social, economic and alimentary functions.

‘Traditional’ or ‘municipal’ wet markets are globally critical food centres, serving people and places that supermarkets do not (Figuié and Moustier 2009). From New York to Nairobi, Wageningen to Wuhan, open-air markets selling fruits, vegetables, meats and, in some cases, wild animals are bedrocks of diverse food economies. Broadly dismissing wet markets endangers the foodways of billions of people, from small-scale farmers to market vendors and urban eaters.

Calls to close ‘filthy’ markets in poor countries (e.g. Froelich 2020) also slip into discourses of hygienic racism (Colloredo-Mansfeld 1998) and developmentalism (McMichael 2016). Such tropes shift geographies of blame to foreign foodways. For ‘us’ to be safe, this logic holds, ‘they’ must shut their markets. But where should people shop instead?

The unarticulated, but presumed, replacements for traditional markets are supermarkets, especially seductive in times of fear because of the standardisation-based safety they promise. Yet, we know such food safety is an ‘illusion of control’ (Stuart 2008). The industrial production and corporate distribution of livestock has generated numerous viral and bacterial infectious diseases (Wallace 2016) and contributed to the
origins of COVID-19 (Wallace et al. 2020). Meanwhile, the industrial food system has shaped the novel coronavirus’ uneven spread (Herrick 2020). COVID-19’s death toll is higher among people with chronic conditions, like diabetes and hypertension. These conditions disproportionately affect marginalised groups through intersecting effects of the production, distribution and consumption of industrial food (Mendenhall 2012; Gálvez 2018; Herrick 2020). Perceiving this slow violence (Nixon 2013) challenges the premise that supermarkets are safer than traditional markets.

Policy prescriptions arising out of alimentary xenophobia, such as calls to eliminate wet markets, distract from real solutions. Public investment in food sovereignty and agro-ecological production, sanitation and enforceable health regulations, and reducing global demand for meat, can help create shorter, safer food-supply chains. These prescriptions, however, do not help more Wal-Marts open in Wuhan.

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