



Perspective

Settler colonialism and the (im)possibilities of a national food policy

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Abstract

In this perspectives piece we ask: is it possible for a national food policy to form the foundation for sustainable and equitable food systems in Canada? First, we argue that under the current settler government, such a policy does not provide this foundation. Second, we consider what might be possible within the scope of a national food policy, examining our responsibilities as settlers to hold our government accountable so policies do not further exacerbate food system inequities. To mitigate some of the harmful effects of current food-related policy, we offer several suggestions regarding how settlers might begin to rethink our investments in the Canadian state and settler food systems: 1) repatriate land and transform private property structures; 2) support Indigenous food provisioners; and 3) build knowledge and support for non-extractive relationships. These suggestions will not decolonize a national food policy; rather, they present short-term actions that we urge settlers to advocate for in order to address some of the ways the Canadian government attempts to restrict Indigenous food systems.

Keywords: food policy, Indigenous food systems, settler colonialism

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DOI: 10.15353/cfs-rcea.v5i3.275

ISSN: 2292-3071

Introduction

As the settler Canadian government moves forward to create a Food Policy for Canada, we ask: is it possible for a national food policy to form the foundation for sustainable and equitable food systems in Canada? First, we argue that under the current settler government, such a policy cannot provide this foundation. Second, we consider what settlers, such as ourselves, might advocate for within the scope of a national food policy, recognizing our responsibility to hold our government accountable so policies do not exacerbate food system inequities.¹ To mitigate some of the harmful effects of current Canadian food policy, we make three suggestions: 1) repatriate land and transform private property structures; 2) support Indigenous food providers in their work to build relevant and culturally appropriate systems; and 3) build knowledge and support for diverse non-extractive food networks. These suggestions will not decolonize a national food policy; rather, we argue they present short-term actions that settlers can advocate for within the settler state to address some of the ways the Canadian government attempts to restrict and oppress Indigenous food systems.

As two settler scholar-activists, we offer these suggestions as a starting place to invite other settlers to reflect on the ways that a national food policy reproduces investments in the Canadian state and white supremacy. In doing so, we recognize the tension between the phrase “nothing about Indigenous peoples without Indigenous peoples” and the need for settlers, and people of privilege generally, to take responsibility for engaging our own communities, including interrogating white supremacist and colonial policies and narratives. We attempt to work within this tension by taking guidance from Indigenous scholars and activists, highlighting their suggestions and teachings that relate to the discussion below, while at the same time being clear that this paper is based in our own experiences. Thus, we speak as scholar-activists rooted in a settler worldview, whose knowledge, perspectives, and experiences are partial and incomplete (Rose, 1997). In doing so, we do not pretend to overcome the above-mentioned tension; rather, we offer the following with humility, responsibility, and the hope that settlers such as ourselves will work towards better relationships with Indigenous nations.

Situating land, property and food policy in spaces beyond colonization

The development of a national food policy within the Canadian settler state is unable to lay the basis for decolonizing food systems as it relies on—and therefore reinforces—the institutions

¹ Settler is a “relational” term that refers to communities who are positioned in particular ways to Indigenous nations and the state (Vowel, 2016, p. 16-17). For example, a settler is created as a result of and in relation to colonialism and can be described as communities and individuals who occupy Indigenous lands (Snelgrove, Dhamoon, & Corntassel, 2014; Tuck and Yang, 2012). However, the category of settler is not monolithic. As Thobani (2007) argues, “the racial configurations of subject formation within settler societies are thus triangulated: the national remains at the center of the state’s (stated) commitment to enhance national wellbeing; the immigrant receives tenuous and conditional inclusion; and the Aboriginal continues to be marked for loss of sovereignty” (p. 18).

and authority of the state. As we have argued elsewhere, the processes embedded in state policymaking are inherently colonial (Kepkiewicz & Rotz, 2018). Hence, to create sustainable and equitable food systems, settler food activists need to challenge our investment in, and focus on, such a policy. Moreover, critical Indigenous scholars have long stated that it is impossible to dismantle colonial relations within the structures of a settler state (Alfred, 2009; Coulthard, 2014; Maracle, 1996; Simpson, 2011; Tuck & Yang, 2012). As Alfred argues:

History has demonstrated that it is impossible either to transform the colonial society from within colonial institutions or to achieve justice and peaceful coexistence without fundamentally transforming the institutions of the colonialist society themselves. Put simply, the imperial enterprise called “Canada” that is operating in the guise of a liberal democratic state is, by design and culture, incapable of just and peaceful relations with Indigenous peoples. (2009, pp. 183-184)

In this context, our understanding is that decolonization requires Indigenous self-determination and land repatriation to Indigenous nations (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Yet, the large-scale repatriation of land remains a distant reality as long as settler governments continue to claim sovereignty over Indigenous land and nations. Despite settler state attempts to remove Indigenous authority, Indigenous governance systems and jurisdiction continue to exist, embedded within landscapes and ecologies (Dennison, 2014; Pasternak, 2013). Thus, we feel it is necessary to preface this perspective article by arguing that it is impossible to decolonize a national food policy that is administered by the federal government.

National food policy: Possibilities within current settler government proposals

While we do not believe it is possible to decolonize a federally led food policy, settlers have a responsibility to demand that policy supports the work of Indigenous food activists as much as possible, for example, by improving immediate access to land and food. At the same time, we recognize that changing state policies is only one aspect of settler responsibility. Following the work of the People’s Food Policy’s *Indigenous Circle*² (Indigenous Circle, 2011), we understand policy change as a shorter-term strategy occurring alongside longer-term struggles for Indigenous sovereignty and jurisdiction over land. In this special issue focused on the development of a national food policy, we centre this shorter-term strategy by calling for policies that mitigate settler attempts to restrict Indigenous food systems. Following Indigenous scholars and activists, we argue that mitigation includes policies that address current land relations,

² The Indigenous Circle provided guidance during the creation of the People’s Food Policy Project. As that project came to an end, the Indigenous Circle became “a space where Indigenous People and non-Indigenous allies can share, strategize, and act to ensure food sovereignty for Indigenous Peoples.”

improve supports for Indigenous food providers, and prioritize resilient and non-extractive relationships.

Repatriating land and transforming private property structures

First, we argue for food policies that critically examine property rights and tenure, and re-configure how food, land, and water access is determined. Currently, the *nature* and *scope* of government support focuses on preserving private land ownership regimes. We believe this needs to be transformed, requiring a move away from private property regimes based on the understanding that “the Canadian system of property is predicated on the denial and exclusion of Indigenous political authority” (Dorries, 2012, p. 111). Additionally, this requires a shift away from state-centric designations of “rights”, toward *community designed* and *led* governance processes, as, processes shape outcomes (Corntassel, 2012).

Following Indigenous scholars and activists, we suggest that these processes prioritize Indigenous designed and led systems that work within Indigenous governance structures and legal systems. In some places, Indigenous organizations and activists have suggested that this will require a re-commitment to treaty agreements that guarantee Indigenous access to hunting, gathering, and fishing lands and waters (Food Secure Canada, 2017b) as well as an immediate halt to resource extraction projects that restrict Indigenous access to land necessary for food provisioning (Morrison, 2008). For example, projects such as Site C dam that will “irreversibly damage” Indigenous lands (Blanchfield, 2007) must be stopped immediately as many Indigenous communities³ have repeatedly explained that these lands are integral for their food systems, which include and are connected to broader spiritual, cultural, economic, and political systems (Morin, 2017). That said, holding the state to treaty agreements certainly does not apply to all land and water within the territory “claimed” by the Canadian government and would still likely imply colonial applications of rights discourse, which does little to support acts of resurgence on traditional territories, as it fails to “offer meaningful restoration of Indigenous homelands and food sovereignty” (Corntassel, 2012, p. 93).

In this context, we advocate for a national food policy that prioritizes land access for Indigenous food providers. As Indigenous food activists have argued, this will require prioritizing Indigenous food provisioning practices over settler food systems, including within forestry, fisheries, rangeland and agricultural policies (Morrison, 2008, p. 20). For example, the Indigenous Circle recommends working with different Indigenous nations to “set aside adequate tracts of land within the national and provincial parks and lands designated as “crown” land for the exclusive use of Indigenous hunting, fishing and gathering” (Indigenous Circle, 2011, p. 9).

³ While, in many cases, Indigenous communities have stood together against extraction projects, we want to acknowledge the diverse range of opinions and perspectives within and between Indigenous communities. We recognize that Indigenous communities, cultures and politics are extremely diverse rather than homogeneous.

Relatedly, we suggest that a national food policy ought to play a role in mitigating rising settler and corporate land consolidation and land grabbing, with restrictions on settler development projects. As research has shown, land grabbing is driven by disparities in class and capital access within a settler colonial context (Rotz, Fraser, & Martin, 2017; Desmarais, Qualman, Magnan & Wiebe, 2015; Le Billon & Sommerville, 2016). Rather than foreign ownership restrictions, we suggest restrictions based on one's income, access to capital, number of properties owned, acreage, and, of course, interest in food provisioning.

Addressing land ownership, tenure, and consolidation in these ways is an important first step, but we recognize that it does not shift land policy away from the state-mediated rights discourse that has been heavily criticized by Indigenous scholars and activists (Corntassel, 2012; Coulthard, 2014). These policy proposals do not directly question or resist the ways in which land reform has, and continues to, reinforce settler control over Indigenous lands. Decolonization is not about Indigenous inclusion or involvement in settler spaces, but rather centers on the repatriation of Indigenous lands to Indigenous nations (Byrd, 2011; Coulthard, 2014; Lawrence & Dua, 2005; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Importantly, we believe this repatriation of land necessitates settler engagement with Indigenous legal systems as laws that apply not only to Indigenous nations but also to settler communities (Borrows, 2005; Todd, 2016). This is crucial when considering food provisioning, given that settler food systems have continually attempted to erase Indigenous food systems.

Supports for Indigenous food provisioners

Currently the vast majority of government support related to food provisioning is targeted toward expanding and commercializing conventional farming enterprises for those who are already settled on the land. For instance, under Growing Forward 2⁴, well over 50 percent of government funding under bilateral agreements are devoted specifically to expanding “competitiveness and market development” and agricultural innovation activities, which often results in support for large-scale and/or export-oriented farmers and processors (National Farmers Union, 2013).

In this context, we advocate for divestment from industrial-scale chains and re-investment in marginalized food provisioners who tend to operate in more diverse ways and at a less corporate scale. In particular, we argue for support for diverse Indigenous food providers, including ecological growers, harvesters, fishers, and hunters. We suggest these supports include funding to build relevant and culturally appropriate markets and infrastructure, land transfers to Indigenous food providers, ensuring projects and programming are owned and directed by

⁴ Growing Forward 2 was a five-year (2013-2018) federal policy framework for the agricultural and agri-food sector. GF2 included “a \$3 billion dollar investment by federal, provincial and territorial (FPT) governments and formed the foundation for government agricultural programs and services. GF2 programs focused on innovation, competitiveness and market development” (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2018)

Indigenous communities, and removing structural constraints to knowledge sharing and creation related to Indigenous food systems.

Following Dawn Morrison (2008), Secwepemc founder and coordinator of the Working Group on Indigenous Food Sovereignty, we suggest a central component of any food policy should be based on support for projects that are designed and led by Indigenous communities themselves, rather than projects conceived in Ottawa which are then placed upon Indigenous peoples via colonial modes of “consultation”. Similarly, we advocate for a shift in how government funding is prioritized and allocated and that Indigenous organizations and communities (for example, the Arctic Institute of Community-based research) would benefit from *ongoing and untied* resources to support their work to build community food sovereignty. Here we again follow Dawn Morrison (2008) who recommends that meaningful and adequate funding is allocated for programs created and led by Indigenous peoples based in Indigenous values and knowledge (Indigenous Circle, 2011). Morrison recommends funding for coordinators and technical support for community-based projects promoting food sovereignty in Indigenous communities. Additionally, she suggests incentives for the development of “local community based economies” as well as institutional support for community kitchens, smokehouses, feasting halls, and gardens (Morrison, 2008, p. 21).⁵

Following multiple calls to provide supports for Indigenous food systems (Indigenous Circle, 2011; Food Secure Canada, 2017b; Morrison, 2008), we suggest that a key part of doing so includes policy support for hunters, gatherers, and fishers, and specifically Indigenous communities who rely on these practices as part of their food systems and diets. This is vital in a context where government policies have continually undermined Indigenous nations’ ability to harvest traditional land-based foods (Veeraraghavan et al., 2016). For example, provincial policies constrain the ability of Indigenous peoples to hunt certain animals as well as restrict when, where, and how much they are able to hunt (Veeraraghavan et al., 2016). Federal requirements that country foods must be processed through licensed facilities have constrained the flow of these foods, which scholars have argued negatively impacts Indigenous food sovereignty (Burnett, Skinner, & LeBlanc, 2015). Furthermore, the failure of programs such as Nutrition North to equitably address Indigenous food insecurity reveals the need to diversify who makes decisions and how different voices participate in policy development. In this context, we again argue that specific policy recommendations that support Indigenous food systems should be developed and directed by local Indigenous nations.

In a context where Indigenous food provisioning practices often receive scant governmental resources (e.g. no specific reference was made to Indigenous food systems within the Truth and Reconciliation’s *Calls to Action*), we call settler attention to Indigenous discussions around how funding and support can be transferred from settler coffers to Indigenous food provisioning initiatives. We argue that settlers and settler governments need to focus on

⁵ This could be through a mixture between Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), Agri-Food Canada, and public health funding, but would need to be consistent, secure, and untied.

making that money available while refraining from settler compulsions to define program guidelines and delineate what “successful” projects mean.

Building knowledge & support for non-extractive relationships

Third, we advocate for policy that fosters resilient and non-extractive relationships throughout the food system: namely, between food providers, the public sector, and the alternative food movement. Agriculture and Agri-food Canada’s strong focus on market-based growth, competition, and commercialization has contributed directly to current conditions of social and ecological specialization (i.e. corporate concentration of land ownership and monoculture agriculture, etc.). The three main investment programs under Growing Forward 2—Agri-Innovation, Agri-Marketing and Agri-Competitiveness—have been directed toward industry-led commercialization, modernization, and market expansion of agricultural production, which isn’t expected to shift significantly with the more recent Canadian Agricultural Partnership—of which trade, competition and commercialization make up the bulk of the funding (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2018).

Meanwhile, under the new Agricultural Partnership program there is little support for place-based, watershed-scale, or sector-wide efforts to enhance socio-ecological diversity. Yet, we suggest that settlers have a responsibility to push for provincial and federal food policy that enhances social and ecological health (which extends beyond agriculture), as these aspects are continually externalized by economic markets. For example, we advocate for government to improve access to high quality information produced by a range of interests. We believe the key here is that a diversity of viable (and sustainability focused) alternatives to intensification and commercialization should be made available to all food providers. Comprehensive education and skill building for diverse food system practices is possible through publicly- and community-supported workshops, mentorship programs, and food provider-to-food provider training.

For their part, alternative food networks (AFN’s) have the potential to build closer, more enduring relationships with marginalized actors in the food system, while concurrently pressing for policy action. Building such relationships may help to broaden and strengthen non-commodified networks, build coalitions, and act in solidarity with one another. As Lugones (2010) asks, “How do we learn from each other? How do we do it without harming each other but with the courage to take up a weaving of the everyday that may reveal deep betrayals?” (p. 377). In this sense, how can settlers reflect on the breadth and depth of settler colonialism and, through this learning and reflection, mobilize in ways that support Indigenous visions for health, wellbeing and resurgence? Governments can learn from some of the coalitions between AFN’s and Indigenous movements in ways that offer a deeper understanding of the structural injustice of current land relations and how public policy, and agri-food policy in particular, has shaped these relations. The question then becomes: what will governments do with that knowledge?

Considering the ways that those with access to land can offer their land (intermittently or permanently) in the service of educational activities is another potential starting place. We suggest this could include activities directed by Indigenous communities as well as supporting Indigenous knowledge reclamation (for example: the Working Group on Indigenous Food Sovereignty as well as programs such as the Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning). As Wildcat, McDonald, Irlbacher-Fox, and Coulthard (2014) argue “if colonization is fundamentally about dispossessing Indigenous peoples from land, decolonization must involve forms of education that reconnect Indigenous peoples to land and the social relations, knowledges and languages that arise from the land” (p. 1).

Support for other educational activities might include settler education about Canada’s ongoing attempts at Indigenous physical, cultural, and political elimination, including better support for organizations doing some of this work (for example: the National Farmers Union *Working Group on Indigenous Solidarity* and Meal Exchange’s *Decolonizing Book Club*). To begin to heal Indigenous-settler relationships we suggest this kind of education allows settlers to collectively learn about colonial genocide, Indigenous presence, and Indigenous resurgence and resilience. More broadly, we suggest that settlers 1) educate each other about settler privilege and its relationship to land, 2) participate in acts of land-based Indigenous solidarity/support alongside resistance to settler privilege, and 3) fund and support Indigenous resurgence and knowledge circulation. Of course, this list is not exhaustive; there is much more to be done.

Conclusion

While we recognize the concerns with an approach that *moves toward* rather than *takes action*, most settler Canadians do not currently take responsibility for ongoing colonial violence (Simpson, 2011, p. 21). As we have argued above, a national food policy is based on settler state jurisdiction over Indigenous lands, and therefore does not provide a meaningful opportunity to repatriate all lands to Indigenous nations. In this context, we highlight the potential to use food policy as a shorter-term strategy to mitigate ongoing state violence, while creating conversations that demand settler Canadians confront the ways settler colonialism is reproduced and resisted on a daily basis. More pragmatically, and following calls from Indigenous scholars and activists, we advocate for a national food policy that allocates resources to Indigenous food systems and, most importantly, call on settlers broadly to support Indigenous struggles for land and sovereignty.

Acknowledgments: First, we would like to thank all of the grassroots food activists who are working to build more sustainable equitable food systems and who we continue to learn so much from. Thank you to the three peer reviewers who provided thoughtful feedback on initial drafts of this article. Thank you also to the editorial teams who put this Special Issue together and who offered guidance and feedback throughout the process. This work was supported by the Vanier

Canada Graduate Scholarship program, the Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship program, and SSHRC Insight Grant #76166 – Unsettling Perspectives and Contested Spaces: Building Equity and Justice in Canadian Food Activism.

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