



Report

# The Power Project

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TABLE



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## Cover

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TABLE is a global platform for knowledge synthesis, for reflective, critical thinking and for inclusive dialogue on debates about the future of food.

TABLE was originally founded as a collaboration between the University of Oxford, the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU) and Wageningen University and Research (WUR) and the network has since expanded to include la Universidad de los Andes (Colombia), and la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

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## The Power Project

At TABLE, we select annual themes to guide our work. These are usually concepts that act as fault lines in discussions of food system transformation, and concern what a 'good' food future might look like. Through a series of [reports](#), [essays](#), [podcasts](#), [events](#) and [explainers](#) we consider the concept from many different angles. We hope that the totality of this work helps reveal the range of values, assumptions and evidence that shape stakeholders' views and illuminates how and why they may disagree.

TABLE's [report](#) at the close of our SCALE theme noted that **power** was at the root of many concerns about localised or globalised food system approaches. Power is of course a too-big topic, encompassing not only its operation, mechanisms, handlers and impacts, but also what it is and how it is to be identified and redistributed. We approach the concept from multiple angles and via diverse modes of analysis to give a sense of its multifaceted nature. In a collection of **17 podcasts**, TABLE asked contributors from a range of disciplines, professional backgrounds and ideological positions to tell us how they understand power and see its operations in their work. Our **essays and blogs** expanded on these and offer case studies and personal reflections. Our **events** gave contributors a chance to interact: [An open discussion on power](#) asked how participants see power fitting into conversation, while in [Whose knowledge counts](#) speakers asked how power might determine what we take as evidence. Lastly, we considered TABLE's own experience of power in [Process and Power at TABLE](#).

Power can be a slippery concept to evaluate and discuss. To give it some materiality, we took protein as a case study, exploring how power has maintained this 'charismatic nutrient'<sup>1</sup> at the centre of ideas about nutrition, development and farming. TABLE's **reports** add a historical lens to consider how power has structured cultural understandings of protein when it comes to funding, research and international development strategies and activities in [Primed for Power: a short cultural history of protein](#). The [Investment, Power and Protein in Sub Saharan Africa](#) report examined financial investment in protein production in sub-Saharan Africa, reflecting on how those cultural narratives are still informing resource distribution.

You can explore all the Power materials on our website, [www.tabledebates.org](http://www.tabledebates.org). However, this theme is not hard-edged and many other resources on TABLE deal with questions of power. You can also explore our other themes of [SCALE](#) and [NATURE](#), and the [MEAT: the Four Futures project](#).

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1 Kimura, Aya Hirata, et al. *Hidden Hunger: Gender and the Politics of Smarter Foods*. Cornell University Press, 2016.

## TABLE's Power Theme

### Food and power

The food system presents a complex context for a discussion of power. The outputs of our food system are commodities and products in a marketplace, but also, like housing (shelter) and healthcare (health), vital to our survival. While there may be choice between products or their sources, participation in food consumption is unavoidable. Nor do we have an exclusively functional relationship with food – food is family, culture and identity as well as bodily sustenance, and it has an emotional resonance that gives narrative power (i.e. storytelling) an acute relevance and strength within food system debates. Food connects us to the natural world in a more relational way than leisure and craft – we exert power over nature in agriculture but are also subject to and constrained by its rules and caprices in ways that can make food systems vulnerable. This wealth of meanings around food means it engages 'power' in the most diverse sense. It also means that the potential reach of the power(s) in question is universal – no-one remains untouched.

### Terms of engagement

TABLE's choice of **power** as a theme was based on the premise that power's many meanings and forms are understood and valued differently by different stakeholders, and that its distribution has shaped the course of history – and will shape the future. This piece aims to synthesise, impressionistically, the work under the power theme and to offer some subjective analysis. While the synthesis will make some comparisons, the materials – podcasts, blogs, essays – are not comparable in a methodologically objective sense. They cover different topics and cases, and address different questions. Their incomparability is significant: there is enough room in the huge web of the food system for, to take an example, podcast contributors **Phil Howard**, author of *Concentration and Power in the Food System*, and **Jayson Lusk**, an agricultural economist and author of a books on the transformative impact of technology in food, to each talk about corporations and for one to say corporations are actively destroying society and another that they are fighting to understand and address consumer wants, and for both to be right. All contributors draw on enormous fields and bodies of work within their own disciplines and interests, and also upon their own life experiences: this piece engages only with what emerges in the contributions. While the piece does not refer to or draw consciously on academic theories of power, it will inevitably wander into ideas and patterns well established in power theory.

### Definitions of Power

The lack of a common gauge by which to measure and define power is a methodological obstacle sitting behind many of the conversations within the Power theme – each contributor has a different measure and method of operation in mind. Unlike TABLE's Scale project, in which quantification (how big is a smallholding? on what geographical scale should we think about food security?) was a feasible tool, the Power project has been a journey into less mappable territory. Some forms of power can be counted. Others are more abstract. Its operation is context-dependent and inconsistent: we might evaluate the power of a corporation by its influence and financial resources, and the power of an idea by its spread across media, its purchase in institutions and its ability to persist beyond the integrity of its founding evidence. Both have impacts that can be traced in the world. Contributor **Philip McMichael**'s definition of power as "multi-dimensional" is useful in acknowledging that variety. He offered a diverse list of dimensions: hierarchies of class, race and gender, state institutions, military power, private property, economic power, epistemic power, education, narratives of progress and change, the role of technology, and the power of collective action.

**Joachim Von Braun**, Chair of the UN Food System Summit's Scientific Group, offers an alternative definition: "I would define power as having high level of influence, maybe excessive influence." Von Braun is here more focused on individual actors (although such an actor might range in size from individual to international governing body) and it is relative – having more or less than one's due. Phil Howard invokes a similar way of understanding the operation of power: "the capacity to create foreseen effects on others." For both, power is a description of interactions between actors, and a measure of their relative ability to deploy resources – tangible or otherwise – in the service of intention. For **Herman Brouwer**, reflecting on his work with Joost Guijt at the Wageningen Centre for Development Innovation on multi-stakeholder partnerships: "I often fall back on the definition of power, the one that Martin Luther King proposed at a certain moment in one of his speeches, which is the ability to achieve purpose and effect change... it's really talking much more about agency." If 'influence' the capacity to create foreseen effects on others, emphasising power *relative* to others, 'agency' is a richer force, with more room for responsibility and self.

"I often fall back on the definition of power, the one that Martin Luther King proposed at a certain moment in one of his speeches, which is the ability to achieve purpose and effect change... it's really talking much more about agency."

*Herman Brouwer, on power in multi-stakeholder partnerships*

Power is not only between actors, but networked in systems of power that have developed across time. For Blain Snipstal, "you still can't talk about the development of the food system and the history of power relations in our food system in our country without also then talking about the trajectory of European colonisation... culture is being developed, to say, "Go this way versus this other way." McMichael says of collective action that it "represents a form of what's often called counter hegemony, and that is presenting different ways of seeing the world and acting in it. Reminding people that there are other cultures that have different ways of living." Power dynamics develop in place and culture.

These definitions lead us some way to the organising principles of this synthesis, which look at contributors' approaches to power under three lenses: first, power as **Resources** – who has control over and access to them. Second, power in relation to **Actors**, and the power they wield over and between each other. And thirdly, **Dynamics**: power as a set of dynamics, structures, that set terms for relationships between actors and set context for the value of their resources. These dynamics may privilege the interests of certain actors without aligning with any single actor's intention. Power here works as a pattern of relations capable of unintended consequences, with forms working in concert (but not necessarily conscious collaboration, and perhaps with different motivations) towards certain impacts.

While these lenses were each present in *all* contributors' views to a degree, contributors tended to prefer one over others in their accounts. Tangible forms of power – such as money – feature more visibly in the first two lenses. Those contributors whose focus was on resources or actors tended to understand power more negatively, as an accusation of domination, in which a particular actor holds responsibility for change almost in isolation from others. The third lens – power as dynamics – was more common among those who work with power analyses as a feature of their (academic) discipline; power understood as a set of structural dynamics is comprehensive but

elusive, more easily mistaken for 'just the way things are,' and in which many are complicit but not necessarily proactive. Each lens helped cast light on different features of power, and we look here at each of them in turn.

## RESOURCES: Distribution

Resources are the 'fuel' of power, its tools and currency. Food, land, money and knowledge (and we might classify all manner of other things as resources, subject to circumstance and context) all 'fuel' power's operation in the world. The ability to manage and manipulate resources determines their accumulation or absence, and thereby the freedoms, influence and status that they endow. Distribution, access and deployment therefore become key indicators of the operation of power.

### Food as a Resource

Food is an apt metaphor for power. Lack of power limits agency just as lack of nourishment limits energy. While we might debate how far food system resources like land and productivity are quantifiably limited or finite – *ecomodernism*<sup>2</sup>, for example, rejects the finitude of some 'planetary boundaries' – for the individual, that food is a limit to power (the most basic power of survival) is indubitable. And, just as volume of food doesn't guarantee quality of nourishment without diversity, so too is the variety of forms of power a contributing factor in *empowerment*.

If resources are the sources of human power, the most basic and necessary of these is food itself. This comes into view clearly only at the edges of access to food – those contributors who make that connection are those engaging with the most vulnerable: **Busiso Moyo**, an activist and scholar on the right to food, **Lucy Vincent and Linda Kjær Minke**, who shed light on the conditions of food in prisons, and to a degree **Herman Brouwer and Joost Guijt** who work on multi-stakeholder partnerships that often involve community access to food resources, all understand food as a power source. In its most basic form, power is survival, capacity, or as craftsman and activist **Blain Snipstal** defines power: one's "personal autonomy to move into the world."

**Busiso Moyo**, for whom the *right to food* is a social imperative, explains an idea from his childhood that informs his work: "You can have rich, you can have poor, but no one should go hungry amongst us". His approach draws a moral line between poverty and hunger, separating food as sustenance from food as commodity – setting terms unique to food about the (in)compatibility of the commercial with the moral. Theories of the right to food proceed on a basis of universal access and sufficiency, but current realities are more context dependent, as mycologist and Fungi Foundation founder **Giuliana Furci** highlights: "We can't afford to be extremely democratic with food unless there is a lot of it." Commercial interests give Furci an example of undemocratic apportioning: "Here in Chile, we're one of the primary producers of farmed salmon in the world," and those salmon are fed on pelagic fish like jack mackerel. Poorer communities are fellow consumers of jack mackerel, but cannot afford the salmon. If food is power, uneven distribution of food is not only a humanitarian failure but also a failure of democracy. You cannot participate in democracy without access to food. If food is power, then access to food is a prerequisite for, as well as a consequence of, democracy.

<sup>2</sup> See TABLE's explainer, *What is ecomodernism?* (Breewood 2022) <https://www.doi.org/10.56661/041dba86>

"You can have rich, you can have poor,  
but no one should go hungry amongst  
us."

*Busiso Moyo, on the right to food*

Food is power not only in the form of nourishment/energy, but also as agency. Following vivid descriptions of the innovative ways in which prisoners reclaim their power to make food choices in a constrained environment, e.g. kettle cooking, criminology academic/expert **Linda Kjær Minke** calls for prisoners to have more autonomy over how and what they eat: "it's about trust – because you lose some power because you transfer the power back to prisoners, but it's the power to decide what to eat." For Minke, the power of decision-making is not of equal value to the prison and to the prisoner. The prison loses some control over food provision – in terms of power to manage menus, schedules, interaction – if prisoners have freedom to cook or shop, or eat communally. But for the prisoners, there is a significant gain in personal expression and autonomy, greater than the loss to the prison. In other words, this is not a zero sum exchange.

## Land

A resource central to the production and availability of food is land. **Blain Snipstal** and **Reginaldo Haslett-Marroquin**, founder of Regeneration Farms and a consultant to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and others on projects with indigenous peoples, both closely engage with peasant movements, and understand land as a food-producing resource. It's in that mode that land ownership is closely tied to agency and autonomy. Both Snipstal and Haslett-Marroquin associate the loss of land with loss of power; the capture of land is an act of force: "The foundational principle of colonisation was to remove the power to make decisions. And that was done by removing ownership and control of the landscape".

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*Reginaldo Haslett-Marroquin, on the power of regenerative  
movements*



The conversion of "people into property, into slaves," in American history proceeded, for Snipstal, in conjunction with the conversion of "the land into commodity, into something that can be bought and sold." Commodification of land – making it a financial asset – displaces and dismantles the agency and autonomy of those who held it. Haslett-Marroquin compares his restricted participation in the US food system – as a small farmer with constrained market access – with the autonomy he enjoyed in Guatemala where he and other small-scale growers had greater access to markets and supply chains. The exercise of community agency that land allowed supported his participation in local governance – not financially but in a hierarchy of accountability: "It's about holding those elected officials in the government today accountable for what matters to communities. But to do that, communities have to be making decisions." Communities cannot hold government accountable if they don't themselves have decision-making power – democracy cannot proceed without the autonomy that land access facilitates. In the colonial strategy recounted here, land is appropriated from those for whom it was a resource of agency and autonomy, to become a capital asset for the takers – different types of power, of different value to the holders. As land is moved between 'owners', the relative losses and gains of power are again not zero sum.

## Knowledge

Knowledge appears in our power discussions as a resource in two particular ways – first in that different forms of knowledge are not valued equally as resources, and secondly as a resource in the form of data that might accumulate or only be accessible to particular actors.

The UN Food System Summit 2023, an international stocktaking conference convened by UN agencies including the Food and Agriculture Organisation, International Fund for Agricultural Development and World Food Programme, attracted criticism of the knowledge forms included in the conference sessions. Responding to critiques of the summit's stakeholder list (that it preferred natural scientists and economists), Chair of the Summit's Scientific Group **Joachim von Braun** contended, "one should be pretty satisfied that understanding of political issues, power, sociology of consumption and nutrition was sufficiently well represented as were the hard sciences." Von Braun's list acknowledges that forms of knowledge beyond the 'hard' sciences should be represented in decision making processes, but it still privileges forms of academic or theoretical expertise (knowledge *about*) over and above lived experience (knowledge *of*). For **Blain Snipstal** agricultural systems, as they are, undervalue the knowledge of those working directly on the land, whose insights should, rather, be prioritised. **Jason Clay** likewise prioritises the value of practice-based knowledge among farmers: "We want professionals doing this job, right?" For Clay, the context of a crisis situation, i.e. of climate breakdown and the need to feed growing populations, is the rationale for foregrounding this place-based expertise. This knowledge *of* is of value, for Clay, because of its interaction with context.

Knowing *about* goes beyond the boundaries of personal experience, grasping the 'big picture' and making connections between experience and theory, but those practising their knowledge e.g. farmers, fishers, might argue that it loses the contextual implications that experience – i.e. knowledge *of* – can capture. To a degree this is inevitable when working at the global level, knowledge *of* becomes increasingly unfeasible as you zoom out. The zoomed-out scope of knowledge *about* inevitably makes it better suited to big, global politics – but this also privileges particular actors. Both forms are valuable. Perhaps the key problem of these top-down or bottom-up knowledge forms is their isolation from each other – they are rarely held by the same people, and there is limited account (at least in this collection of material) of either the willingness or the infrastructure to coordinate between the two.

In [his report](#) examining financial investment in protein production in sub-Saharan Africa, **Jeremy Brice** notes the difficulty of accessing private sector financial data, to identify patterns in private investment. This raises the question of access, i.e. to whom the knowledge is available, that **Philip McMichael** explores in reference to

'big data'. McMichael expresses concern about organisations that are able to collect detailed landscape data via satellites on topography, climate and many other features. Knowledge that might otherwise have only been available to those working on that land is instead aggregated into global datasets. There are environmental opportunities here, "It's a way of attempting to improve and make more sustainable the food production across the world that's internationalised. It's an attempt to rectify some of the grossest environmental deprecations across the world." And yet, he states, "knowledge of landscapes is being monopolised by people who never farmed in their lives."

For McMichael, the problem is that without context, knowledge emerges as something that can be carved up and claimed like land on a map. The actors collating this data are strengthened in their operation by extraction from the local level: "Knowledge about local landscapes is being squirrelled away through the elaboration of these datasets." Data sourced at big landscape scales might be inaccessible to those working on the land. Knowledge gained by experience and held for the purpose of practice at local scales might serve very different purposes when held in aggregate – and can empower different actors. Without context, the resource loses its legitimacy.

## Distribution and Democracy

The question of distribution is one of how power is apportioned in the world – it asks first for a description of who holds it and second, it is normative in asking if that apportioning is 'correct' or not. Some contributors – particularly those with an eye on corporate monopolies – felt that more equitable distribution of power was fundamental to legitimate and credible decision-making, irrespective of the resulting decisions and their impacts. That all actors should not have the power to represent their own interests was itself a moral evil. Other contributors focused on the outcome of the apportionment, concerned that uneven power distribution would mean that solutions to food and environment challenges would be inappropriate or ineffective.

Fair distribution of food as a resource for power has a clear moral rationale. For some, this same rationale holds true across power forms. **Phil Howard**'s work on concentrations of power in food systems focuses on those corporate actors who have moved to consolidate their power. He describes patterns of concentration: "The percentage of food sold in the US, about a third comes from just 10 firms", and "just four firms control over 80% of beef processing," while there are, "just three firms that control over half of pesticide sales." For Howard, consolidation is unfair distribution of economic control; it is anti-democratic because it puts decision-making power in the hands of too few people. This is for Howard a structural moral ill, intensified by its connection with food – which means those decisions have implications for "even who gets to eat." For **Jennifer Clapp**, consolidation has a number of undemocratic tendencies: it results not only in less competition, and fewer, less diverse participating actors, but because the total actors are, as a result, fewer, there are more opportunities to collaborate – or viewed more malignly, to collude – in structuring a system congenial to their own interests. It is undemocratic not only in process, but also in its harmful consequences.

For other contributors, distribution and outcomes are not always causally connected, and the former may be of limited importance if the outcomes are positive: **Sahil Shah** of Sustainable Seaweed takes the view, "power is often seen as a negative, really we should be looking at the outcomes of power." An outcomes approach offers a more tangible yardstick against which to measure change, but working towards a specified outcome prioritises ends over means, which for some opens space for morally questionable decision-making and a lack of commitment to due process. For **Julie Guthman**, a professor whose research interests include alternative food movements and technology, outcomes are an unreliable target. She references the work of David Harvey on utopia-as-a-process to explain her distrust of the narrow food system visions proposed by food industry, venture capitalists and entrepreneurs, preferring to put faith in processes that do not confidently prescribe outcomes.

However, can a focus on process lead to more token forms of change? We might see marginalised people and interests being offered 'platforms' and given voice in decision-making spaces – i.e. in process – but without measurement against a defined end goal, this may never be translated into tangible, material, or economic forms of power and decision-making infrastructure.

## ACTORS: Responsibility and legitimacy

Turning our attention to actors raises a new set of questions. When thinking about power through the lens of resources, monitoring distribution provided us with a key evaluative tool: what is the equivalent when evaluating power through the lens of actors. **Joachim Von Braun** sees power relations as most fruitful where, "the positive forces of care in consumption doubled up with the positive opportunities of science." Power in this framing is a force to be wielded consciously and responsibly by actors whose care and dynamism is what determines positive power relations. Responsibility, then, might be our evaluative tool.

To accommodate the many shapes an 'actor' might take, we might think of them as units of agency to which resources and other forms of power accumulate. In this section we explore the perspectives of contributors attending to this 'actors' lens, considering how we might identify those units, how their relative power is to be compared, what are their responsibilities, and when is that power legitimate or otherwise?

## Voice and representation

**Herman Brouwer** offers a stark example of how voice or representation has limited value in isolation from other forms of power. He recounts a formative experience facilitating a multi-stakeholder partnership working towards conflict resolution in management of a fishery, involving activists, NGOs, government and business owners. A fisherman participating in the partnership was shot for his perceived challenge to the power dynamics of the fishery. The story is offered as a warning about the naivete of attempting to create 'politics-free' spaces that exclude the power dynamics of the outside world – "this emerging partnership, actually still took place in a context of extreme power differences." Actors entering a new space do not simply leave their existing power relations at the door.

Several contributors referenced the UN Food Systems Summit in 2023 to highlight their doubts about offering 'representation' in international space as a means of empowerment. In international spaces, 'global' and local actors interact, meaning umbrella bodies must speak on behalf of diverse smaller or less powerful groups. Farmers – a group of enormous diversity within single nations, not to mention globally – are often represented in this way. In such a space, disparate groups connected by abstractions e.g. Indigeneity must function alongside more whole and more cohesive organs like corporations or governments. Civil society bodies may represent issues or communities that would otherwise go unconsidered, yet these bodies are not elected, their alignment with those they represent is not benchmarked, and the breakdown of *which* issues and communities are represented may go unanalysed.

Presence in the space is claimed to give power, but does it really have any empowering features? Brouwer highlights that large and powerful stakeholders, "can frame the problem in a way which is convenient to them. And also, many of these elite stakeholders, so to speak, they also have paid jobs, they have got travel budgets, they've got all these other things, which makes participation easy." **Jessica Duncan**, whose research focuses

on the politics of participation in food policy, warns that the representative value is contingent upon the design of the process: "I'm often surprised to see how little effort or design is put into the establishment of these processes, it's almost assumed that as long as you have enough bodies present that that constitutes adequate participation or adequate consultation." Where novel spaces replicate the range of actors in an existing system, they may simply replicate the power dynamics in which they sit on the outside.

**"I'm often surprised to see how little effort or design is put into the establishment of these processes, it's almost assumed that as long as you have enough bodies present that that constitutes adequate participation or adequate consultation."**

*Jessica Duncan, on 'we eat drink and breathe food policy'*

Proliferation of space can also be disempowering – international NGOs and umbrella networks are necessary for all organisations to be able to participate in more and more international spaces as these are created by UN conferences, treaties and international alliances. Umbrellas, though, consolidate rather than generate or rebalance power: [COP28 in 2023](#)<sup>3</sup> still hosted 2,456 fossil fuel lobbyists to just 1,509 delegates for the ten most climate vulnerable nations. These spaces may end up draining the limited time and financial resources of smaller stakeholders, and offering an opportunity to better resourced actors to magnify their influence by repeating their engagement at all moments claimed to be internationally significant. Formal international spaces are established by those already holding power – bringing less resourced actors in requires asking them to prioritise their participation over other ways in which they need to resist, organise and effect change. Voice, these contributors suggest, is a consequence rather than a cause of power and so a limited and unreliable tool in its redistribution.

## Violence: who gets 'actor' status?

Brouwer's account of the murdered fisherman is a rare reference to violence in these discussions of power. Violence appears most literally and tangibly in the contributions that discussed animals. This is a sphere in which violence is still not always identified as such, in which power relations defined by force are assumed to emerge from 'a state of nature' rather than out of political, cultural and economic conditions. Contributors concerned with animals recognise those harms as violence, point out the culturally constructed elements of our acceptance of that violence, and consider its interconnectedness with violence in human relationships.

Institutional engagement with non-human power is mainly articulated in limits to human freedoms over animals: the animals' own freedoms are 'freedoms from' e.g. pain and fear. It is mainly in their disempowerment that animals are revealed as subjects/agents that might conversely be empowered. Animal environment researcher [Sofia Wilhelmsson](#) discusses the suffering endured by pigs as part of their transport in agricultural trade. Former vet [Rebecca Sanders](#) questions the cruelty embedded in livestock agriculture. In [Tamsin Blaxter's](#) exploration of Faroese whaling traditions and its opponents, she describes creatures with no control over the hunts nor over their changing environments – "the pilot whales and the Atlantic white-sided dolphins, which are the two main species taken, who have no power over their environment, which is being made more toxic and

<sup>3</sup> See TABLE's essay, *COP28: Reflections on an expanding international event*  
<https://tabledebates.org/essays/cop28-reflections-expanding-international-event>

more dangerous by the year." All the animals considered experience this lack of power – lack of agency – as violence.

Power over animals is consolidated in legal and regulatory forms: the right to hunt whales is legally permitted to the Faroese, the right to keep livestock animals in cages permitted or banned by law or regulatory commitment. Defining an animal as being food changes the power or agency we're willing to allocate them. **Wilhelmsson** and **Sanders** both point in their contributions to the arbitrary categorisation of animals as domestic or livestock: "... animal welfare legislation... can be seen as society's moral guidelines for how we interact with animals. But often we allow what is considered tradition [to feature in these guidelines], and hence are, to some extent, purpose-navigated." (SW) A similar example of categorisation determining rights is the idea of 'invasiveness,' explored by historian **Alma Igra**, who considers the colonial legacies of 'invasive' species. Categorisation as 'native' or 'invasive' has historically been purposefully deployed in the service of nation-building. The constraints on power are filtered by regulation, but also by what has gone before – rather than by an ethical framework or scientific evidence.

Both Wilhelmsson and Sanders explore the connection between violence towards animals and the disempowerment of those whose role it is to enact that violence directly. Much has been written (although little attended to) about the poor mental health of abattoir workers, for example. Slaughterhouse workers as a group are disempowered – they do violence by which they are psychologically harmed on behalf of a business, and are lacking in economic (as the jobs are low-income) and even legal (noting the high rates of undocumented workers in US slaughterhouses) power. Sanders goes on to connect slaughterhouses to more socially embedded, inter-human violence based on a study that "found 'slaughterhouse employment has significant effects on [increasing the number of] arrests for rape and arrests for sex offences' in areas where meatpacking is conducted, even when controlling for a host of potentially confounding demographic variables." This poses interesting questions about the sediment-like accrual of violence that, when normalised in one sphere, seeps into others. Violence in its accumulation is disempowering to the actors involved and those to whom they relate. It is perhaps for this reason that some contributors are eager to extricate power from the idea of violence, to disentangle the "conflation of power and force" (Snipstal).

What might the reverse of this accrual look like? **Sofia Wilhelmsson** describes co-creating techniques to reduce animal stress in livestock transportation, by working directly with drivers who transport live animals. Rather than a zero sum equation in which the hauliers' power over the pigs in their care is increased by a disempowerment of their charges, Wilhelmsson and the participants find that increasing the connection between hauliers and pigs made the hauliers feel empowered, and offered a better experience (if not more power) for the pigs.

## Legitimacy

So far, we have seen contributors compare actors with more and less power. A further comparison contributors make is of the relative *legitimacy* of power wielded in relations between actors. In **Tamsin Blaxter's** [article](#) and [podcast](#) exploring Faroese whaling practice, the hunters exercise locally the traditional rights awarded to them at a national level by government. Opposition to these rights – i.e. to the whale-hunting – is often coordinated by international civil society organisations like Sea Shepherd, whose influence through their advocacy and media work functions on a much larger stage and spatial scale, enabling global citizens to express and exert influence in a local arena. Blaxter

notes how some of the Faroese community feel this as an invasion. Sea Shepherd themselves recognise an imbalance in international publics having an influence on local affairs – though this is not quite to say they identify themselves as holding too much power. Influence is intangible, and the power to vote or feed into legal process remains exclusive to citizens of the Faroe Islands. Rather, Sea Shepherd consider that to act *legitimately*, they should do so at the same **scale** and subject to the same **context** as their interlocutors in the debate – and are therefore adapting their engagement to a local audience by encouraging opposition to whaling within the community.

Context proves central to legitimacy for many contributors. **Julie Guthman** offers an investment event called 'Food Bites' as an example of venture capital activity in the food system. Guthman suggests that the rapid-fire format, with entrepreneurs 'pitching' their solutions to big food system challenges in 3-4 minute speeches, results in a one-big-problem-needs-one-big-solution framing. They proceed without interacting with the huge, existing bodies of learning on the issues in question and that contain the history of past attempts, resulting in familiar 'solutions' that have long been proven ineffective, such as protein bars to address malnutrition in Sub-Saharan Africa. When interviewed, participants "use these kind of very coarse Malthusian frames: one planet, many people, land shortage, therefore we need to find ways to produce food with much less land." The framing of the problem – global and uncontextualized – generates solutions disconnected from the region and its context of infrastructure, community and experience.

For Guthman, the cross-border freedom with which large investors might fund 'solutions' in national and regional contexts with which they have no familiarity is founded on generalisations built upon, at best, broad national data and, at worst, stereotypes. In **Jeremy Brice's** account of investment in Sub-Saharan Africa, too, the sources of information directing investment decisions function only at a transboundary level, relying on population-level data and continental trends to determine project funding carried out at national and local levels. **Phil Howard** reflects on large companies' ability to cloak the level at which they are functioning: he gives the example of beer products owned by large multinationals that mimic craft beer in their branding in order to move into that market space, products that are in fact displacing those of smaller craft beer businesses whose activity is restricted to a local level.

Contributors do not all agree on the kinds of structures that render power legitimate – faith in government, markets, and other forms of governance varies. The premise of democratic governance might, for some, be that the power wielded by its leaders is codified through protocols and hierarchies of local to national. This is the theoretical mechanism that keeps it accountable to voters and to the communities and scales that directly affect their lives. By contrast, the actors that Guthman, Brice and Howard point to draw their power – i.e. finance, influence – from operations at an international level. These contributors feel that the tools that enable an international actor to exert power at the local level are not benign, rather they are often extractive, or lacking in the characteristics – such as connection to the surrounding community – that give power at the local level its legitimacy. The ability of these power forms to function at a distance meant that they evade contextual constraint or responsibility. This, for these contributors, is an ethical problem, and an irresponsible and illegitimate use of power.

## Intention

The 'actors' lens in this section encourages focus on the agency that deploys power. Power definitions in this vein might align with **Phil Howard's** succinct characterisation of power as "the capacity to create foreseen effects on others." This supposes a choice to act and a knowledge of consequences or impact. However, ways in which contributors describe the interplay of agency, impact and intention is often less straightforward, and intention emerges as untrustworthy in determining power's effects.

How far can impact be traced back to an actor and their intention<sup>4</sup>? For agricultural economist **Jayson Lusk**, choice is the decision-making power of the consumer and consumers as a group consequently hold a lot of power – "food companies... are scrambling all over themselves to get on top of the next consumer trend, or they're paying marketing research companies and sometimes academics like me try to understand where's the consumer going?" But is the 'consumer' in this scenario a real person? Is the body of consumers this framing suggests a group of actual people, or a story of predictors and trends? Consumers may have a collective impact

4 The question of intention, and the difficulty of attributing it with certainty, is at the centre of debates around classification of Ultra-Processed Foods – how far does the profit motive (i.e. intention) define the nature of these foods? Explore this further in our [UPF material](#).

but this doesn't equate to their power and agency as individuals. **Philip Howard**, whose visuals describe industry consolidation in food systems, accepts that food companies may be producing what some consumers want, "but they're also reshaping consumer behaviour to want those products." Consumers have choice within the array of products afforded by their retail outlets, but companies have successfully created desires that inform those choices, for example by steering preferences away from pork and towards chicken, where margins are higher, or away from diverse breeds and towards industrial breeds which are promoted as leaner: "firms have really pushed foods that weren't culturally prevalent, because they have a high profit margin."

Howard's research focus is on more nefarious or disingenuous activity among corporates, where intention and action very much align. Lusk is uncomfortable with "this kind of pejorative notion that the food industry is shaping our food environment, and controlling what we want and what we have available to us." Another of Howard's examples highlights the constraints to which large corporations are themselves subject. He describes a move by Pepsi Cola to bring in more healthy products, in response to changing public concerns about health, which was swiftly penalised in the stock price: "The underlying assumption is, these are not products that are going to allow the firm to grow faster than other firms." While many would find it hard to refute that corporations within the food industry have a significant impact on our food choices, Lusk illuminates an important flaw in that criticism. His key issue is that this conceives – falsely – of the food industry as an aggregated body, exerting power collaboratively and intentionally. And yet this perhaps mirrors Lusk's own elision, noted above, between consumers as a statistical body which has market impact, with the individual decision-makers whose concerted (simultaneous but not collaborative) rather than collective (acting consciously with common intention) action is in fact governed by a huge variety of motivations and contexts.

Actions governed by diverse motivations can act in concert for unrelated and unintended effect. In their essay on the dominance of protein in many discussions about food system transitions, *Primed for Power*, Blaxter and Garnett describe a history of institutional efforts, particularly by imperial and later development institutions, to address a supposed protein deficiency in African populations that took no account of the food cultures of those whom they targeted, nor the economic infrastructure they sat within. And yet, "It is important to note that none of this is to imply that these projects were carried out under false pretences. Scientists and engineers, aid workers and their institutional backers, entrepreneurs and those in corporate governance — all were urgently trying to respond to real and affecting humanitarian need. Rather, systemic and cultural forces channelled these efforts into ineffectual and even irrelevant projects." This example again prompts us to disentangle 'acting collectively' (exerting power as a group, conscious of similar or aligned motivation) and 'acting in concert' (power exerted by the combined intentions of actors who may be driven by different – even opposing – motivations and goals). If intention and outcome diverge, who holds the responsibility for change?

"It is important to note that none of this is to imply that these projects were carried out under false pretences. Scientists and engineers, aid workers and their institutional backers, entrepreneurs and those in corporate governance — all were urgently trying to respond to real and affecting humanitarian need. Rather, systemic and cultural forces channelled these efforts into ineffectual and even irrelevant projects."

*Tamsin Blaxter and Tara Garnett, in 'Primed for Power'*

## DYNAMICS: Setting the terms

Once power is uncoupled from single actors and from intention, how do we understand its operation? Actors and resources remain key, but our focus here is on how these construct environments that determine power relations beyond their own, and restrict the feasibility of change. In the prison food episode of the podcast, *Food Behind Bars* chief executive **Lucy Vincent** explains how the Strangeways prison riot in the UK in 1990 caused a rethinking of prison design and allocation of space. The shape of the prison had enabled prisoners to take control of the kitchens and connecting corridors, vital resources in sustaining the protest and riot over many days. Communal space was a significant casualty of that change: Strangeways now is a space not only without food autonomy, but also without communal dining. This example provides a useful metaphor for the ways in which the structure of a space in which power acts can help determine the power dynamics within it. They may be conducive to some forms of power and not to others, and can restrain and liberate in different ways. A focus on patterns and dynamics does not remove responsibility, but emphasises that intention and other features of single agents may not be sufficient as either explanation or to allocate responsibility.

## Regulation and economic structure

We might think of regulation as the application and removal of limits: for example, removing limits to whaling in the Faroe Islands or applying limits to polluting practices. While regulations may target specific activities, in combination they may establish power imbalances or draw boundaries around activities that only specific types of actor might cross. **Jayson Lusk**, for example, points to regulation of agricultural technology that means only 'big players' with sufficient funds and legal resources can navigate market entry, and notes how calls for regulation as a means to protect good practice against corporate control might have counterproductive effects. Co-founder of agri-tech company Sustainable Seaweed **Sahil Shah**, speaking in the event *An open-ended discussion on power in the food system*, points to the unevenness of global regulatory mechanisms, as an example of the disconnection between intention and impact. The agency of companies developing products and attempting innovation, of farmers wanting access to particular seeds and technology, is (re)directed and constrained by regulatory bodies and their geographical jurisdictions that mean resources and tools (and the power those bestow) go unfettered in some locations and restricted in others. Regulations never act in isolation, but in concert (intentionally or otherwise) with others. Professor in Global Development **Philip McMichael** uses the idea of 'regimes' to describe how diverse actors and regulatory structures might work in a matrix effect to define periods of history by the significance of relations of power, key acts and the regulatory environments they set in play. These regulatory tides come together in ways that enable or disable the flows and influence of different powers. From the colonial, British-centred 'regime' that first created the global food provisioning system, through to the 'corporate food regime' that was solidified with the creation of the WTO in 1995, McMichael shows how power structures and narrative norms impact not only sets of actors, but also the contexts of creation, innovation and governance in which they sit. Regulations are both a response to a situation and generative of new conditions: the 'regime' framing foregrounds the way that regulations have effects that outlive their existence on statute books. Education, culture and institutional norms develop around and in response to regulations, as well as creating the context for their creation, giving them temporally and spatially expansive effects.

**Jennifer Clapp**, whose recent research examines financial actors in the global food system and the politics of trade and food security, identifies three recent regulatory trends. She proposes that these – commodification, deregulation and financialisation – have shifted the make-up of actors in the food system and so changed the motivations and incentives at play within it. The degree to which these changes are the result of concerted effort by powerful actors, or actors working at significant removes from each other but with goals that happen to align, is not the focus here. Instead, the focus is on how the make-up of actors has changed the enabling and limiting factors in the environment, and so constricted the feasibility of change. In Clapp's account of increasing **commodification** of agricultural products, technological changes in food production have foregrounded novel



actors in the food space: 20th century developments in hybrid and, later, modified seeds, "gave rise to private corporations getting interested in the seed industry, because that need to keep producing seeds and hybrid seeds kind of built in intellectual property protection that made it profitable for corporations to get into the agricultural inputs sector." **Financial deregulation** has also encouraged novel actors in speculation: food and agriculture were exempted from the original General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade of 1948, a treaty minimising international trade barriers to boost economic recovery following the Second World War. The World Trade Organisation, which absorbed the GATT in 1994, sought to liberalise food trade and the 1994 Agreement on Agriculture lifted the exemption. Regulation that previously functioned to ward against the price volatility in food markets associated with speculation has, according to Clapp, been eroded to make way for new financial products, developed at a remove from the actual commodities themselves – such as Commodity Index Funds and Exchange Traded Funds, that are indexes of share or commodity prices. Clapp describes the resulting **financialisation** as the increasing involvement of purely financial actors in food systems, at a level of resource and proportion previously unknown: "Corporations are increasingly being owned by these big asset management companies that are being driven by financial imperatives," meaning those same imperatives become more involved in the food system. This in turn has encouraged mergers and acquisitions, resulting in growing consolidation. Patterns that enable and disadvantage certain activities, intentions or actors emerge from these regulatory combinations.

For **Philip Howard**, these patterns are not only a consequence but become determinant of what solutions and changes are available: "If you're a publicly traded firm, you're really going to be pushing the same model of highly processed foods, foods with a high profit margin, using very cheap ingredients, you're going to be pushing this cultural model of something that goes on the centre of the plate, rather than a more diverse and healthy diet." The actors that contribute to this matrix restructuring are demonstrating another level of power: the power to determine the ranking of social priorities. Which actors → which motivations → which incentives → which results: this is the mechanism by which some contributors see the field of available solutions to current challenges – climate change, biodiversity, health and economic wellbeing – narrowing sharply.





## Knowledge

Knowledge develops in response to questions and hypotheses that may pre-empt and encourage particular findings. **Tamsin Blaxter** and **Tara Garnett** describe, in their cultural history of protein *Primed for Power*, how defining colonial malnutrition as 'protein deficiency' determined both research questions and directions during the 'Protein Fiasco' in the middle of the 20th century. This incentivised a flawed narrative identifying protein deficiency as the biggest world health issue, alongside predicted population growth as an assurance of huge protein demand. Protein deficiency was convenient: "The realisation that malnutrition was a particular issue in the colonies created a political incentive for colonial powers to find a diagnosis that was not poverty or a simple lack of food: whereas impoverishment would seem to imply colonial maladministration, if the explanation was something specific to the cultures of colonised populations then colonial governance could not be to blame." The framing of the Kwashiorkor (a disease initially understood as a protein deficiency<sup>5</sup>) problem as part of a culturally-informed protein deficiency demanded a nutrient-specific, rather than systemic, response. The sunk costs fallacy provided a psychological driver, alongside financial incentives like research opportunities and institutional support, for researchers to disregard contradictory evidence. Problems can be tuned to accept responses that rely on particular forms of knowledge. Earlier in the century, war economies had similarly encouraged a technical response – "blockades and rationing created a need to determine the minimum diets that could keep populations healthy," as well as to determine how much protein the agricultural sector should produce. This focus changed the health and nutrition goals of a generation of scientists, leading to "greater power in the hands of nutritional scientists and a reification of nutritional science in the context of concrete goals."

This set of contributors wants us to be wary of congeniality between knowledge types and particular action agendas, as an indicator of power influencing evidence. Both the generation of knowledge and its deployment are strategic as well as responsive. **Rebecca Sanders** notes that purpose has a role in determining what knowledge is made available: during her training as a farm vet, she highlights the understanding implicit in teaching was that the level of care allocated to an animal was determined by its 'use' – domestic or livestock. The goal in question – companionship or food – determines what knowledge is necessary and is acquired. Which knowledge types are prioritised is significant because they may lead to specific solutions. **Philip McMichael** recognises the value of landscape data sets collected and elaborated on a global scale, but is wary of how ownership might affect their deployment. Such datasets may support precision agriculture and the achievement of net reductions in emissions or fertiliser use, yet, "it's not addressing the issue of who has access to the land, who has knowledge." The knowledge – if owned and controlled by digital corporations with no local connection – predetermines what is proposed as a viable solution: "we're talking about monocultures. We're not talking about biodiversity or polyculture," technical innovation over social change.

What counts as knowledge, what sits in the pool of material that forms the references and justifications for a society, is not only determined by whose knowledge it is. For **Francisco Rosado-May** and **Hassan Roba**, contributors to a GAFF report on evidence bases for regenerative farm practices<sup>6</sup> and speaking in the *Whose knowledge counts?* event, what counts is also determined by a collective activity of validation. Roba and Rosado-May are at pains to distinguish the sources of recent, newly introduced knowledge to their indigenous communities, and the mechanisms by which their communities became less familiar with their traditional knowledge base, accumulated across generations. In Roba's account, children of indigenous communities were taught in government schools, and taught agricultural practices that contradicted their traditional methods. Instilled in them too was a hierarchy in which that new knowledge was defined as progressive and productive, with their indigenous knowledge seen as backward and lesser. This was part of a process of validation of the new knowledge forms, a process facilitated by those actors with power. What knowledge accumulates to people, communities and cultures over time is not an inevitable or natural process but directed, even manipulated, by power dynamics.

5 Incidentally Google's AI tool still defines the disease as such, highlighting the narrative power of AI. More on this power in the next section.

6 Global Alliance for the Future of Food, 2021 *The Politics of Knowledge: Understanding the Evidence*.

This validation process also happens via theorisation – i.e. an explanation that can structure facts under hypotheses. Logical flaws, and their ethical implications, are made visible by theory. Considering the connection between human-animal and human-human violence suggested by studies on meat processing plants, Sanders notes the absence of a theory – a story of cause and effect – expressing this connection: "The authors conclude these 'social problems and phenomena ... [will remain] undertheorised unless explicit attention is paid to the social role of nonhuman animals.'" Inattention to particular parts of the food system is reinforced as long as the contributing knowledges remain isolated. While knowledge remains disparate, rather than cohered in explanatory narratives (theorised), it struggles to connect to other ideas and disciplines, or to take a role in stories of cause and effect. As such, absence of theory is an absence of tools for narrative construction, and the untheorised knowledge is more easily constructed out. In both cases, it's not about presence and absence of information, but what is foreground and background, and so available to learning or interpretation.

## Narrative and language: contested terrain

Narratives – like theories – attribute an order and an arc to collections of events, actors and outcomes. They are an inevitably incomplete account of all the facts by dint of the addition of rationale and a clarity of cause and effect: some events will fit better, so some are brought into prominence and importance whereas others, no less real or established, fade or lose attention, and are not repeated in the retelling. As such narratives both claim and consolidate power. **Tamsin Blaxter** recounts the persistence of the narrative of protein deficiency long after the collapse of its founding evidence: "all of the cognitive and cultural biases favouring protein and meat were still there... Scientific claims can leave a cultural imprint which lasts long after expert consensus has moved on." Narratives continue to hold sway beyond the dismantling of their components, and in this is their determinant function. They serve not only to describe the past, but to inform – even prescribe – the future by positioning the present in an arc.

The validating role of cohesive theory is illustrated in how theory might leap ahead of a knowledge base, or long outlast it. Researcher **Jeremy Brice** describes the ubiquity of the nutrition transition theory and its morphing into a narrative of inevitability rather than warning or precedent. The investors he interviews work in a range of structures from international development grants to venture capitalism; their focus is Sub-Saharan Africa, but most work on a global scale and are not based there. All Brice's interviewees cite the necessity of increased protein production in response to a predicted increase in demand in the region – a prediction based, at least in its proportions and its isolation of protein from a wider increase in demand for nutritious food, in the past and in different geographical regions: "nutritional transition models seem to have kind of transformed from being a description of past economic and dietary changes in other parts of the world into really almost a predetermined pathway." As the prediction informs and directs investment, it becomes self-fulfilling. The model is congenial to narratives of both profit and development, and so persists. Narrative power appears for Brice as the capacity to produce an authoritative vision for the future and spark action as a result. The excess of that power is an ability to escape, by its aesthetic durability, the constraints of both intention and evidence.

These examples alert us to how we process narrative: we do not evaluate purely by accordance with evidence or external reality, but appreciate coherence and put greater confidence in stories that hang together well. It's why knowledge as part of a theory is stickier, more available to connection, than knowledge in isolation. Accepting the role of narrative gives language a significant role in signalling and embedding narrative authority. Politico journalist **Eddie Wax** flags that the French Agriculture Minister has been increasingly using the term 'food sovereignty', and the whole government is beginning to take it up. Wax notes that this is a very different version of food sovereignty to that espoused elsewhere in civil society, for example by international peasant movement La Via Campesina. Words are indicators of possession of some body of knowledge, but not proof of its mastery nor its use. **Shefali Sharma** draws on IATP analysis<sup>7</sup>: "A lot of these companies are shifting their narratives, and actually co-opting a lot of civil society narratives around regenerative agriculture or the terms around agroecology." By using the terms, they can insert themselves into narratives created elsewhere, and so claim a role in that narrative's end goals.

<sup>7</sup> IATP, 2022 *Emissions Impossible Europe: how Europe's big meat and dairy are heating up the planet*

While the story holds, it can be appropriated for new interests. Language can be co-opted from the communities in which it has evolved, allowing words to be stripped of central meanings for the convenience of different speakers. Single words are in this way contested terrains in themselves, and power dynamics determine authority. **Reginaldo Haslett-Marroquin** strongly resists attempts to define Regenerative Agriculture, "Defining something like this is one of the most purely colonising things we can do... after you define it and appropriate it, then you structure systems to protect and then expropriate it and invalidate anybody who claims otherwise." Definition here is not descriptive but prescriptive; it doesn't only delineate the boundaries of a term, it makes a claim for future decision-making power. **Giuliana Furci** makes a more positive case for the power of language, describing her campaign as part of the Fungi Foundation to recognise fungi as a protected species under Chilean law – the only nation to include fungi in legislation. As a result, international organisations began to include fungi in their own language: "language creates reality and by acknowledging the interconnectors of nature in language, from a top-down approach, you're ultimately triggering obligatory change."

"Defining something like this is one of the most purely colonising things we can do... after you define it and appropriate it, then you structure systems to protect and then expropriate it and invalidate anybody who claims otherwise."

*Reginaldo Haslett-Marroquin, on the power of regenerative movements*

## Imagination and incumbency

There are two reasons why structure and dynamics are significant for our contributors. First, incumbent – existing, established – ideas gain a power and advantage simply by that establishment. Second, if power structures shape relationships between actors, they also 'structure' how solutions are imagined. Imagination and innovation are for many contributors the first victims of power dynamics which it is harder to be outside than within.

For several contributors, the reason for stasis – absence of change or challenge to power dynamics – is familiarity with, and the familiarity of, the current system. Accepted, past and 'normal' ways of doing things hold an incumbent position that is to a degree their own justification. Jason Clay, reflecting on efficiencies he introduced to an agricultural supply chain, suggests: "Sometimes it's not power, per se, sometimes it's just inertia, and inefficiencies that have been ignored for so long that they seem to be the norm." For **Sahil Shah**, the structure that results from the pattern of regulation across and between countries is not a necessarily strategic or conscious creation: "huge amounts of power sit with the regulatory institutions that determine which activities can and cannot take place and often these aren't necessarily based on what's optimal either from a market or an

environmental standpoint, but often due to what has happened before, and what is socially acceptable." What has happened before sets the terms of what is thinkable now. Interestingly, neither Clay nor Shah identifies these norms as operations of intentional power. In **Jennifer Clapp's** reflections on diversity of actors within a system, there is no 'bad actor' holding responsibility, simply that while we privilege one kind of system we inevitably limit the space for alternatives – "a globalised and concentrated food system does tend to take up space that could be occupied by local and alternative and diverse food systems." For those contributors interested in exertions of power via norms and social machinery, this inertia is not an absence of agency, rather an inability to identify that agency by its alignment with intention; the responsibility to dismantle the energy reinforcing those norms remains.

"Huge amounts of power sit with the regulatory institutions that determine which activities can and cannot take place and often these aren't necessarily based on what's optimal either from a market or an environmental standpoint, but often due to what has happened before, and what is socially acceptable."

Sahil Shah, in 'An open-ended discussion on power in the food system'

Imagination, or as **Julie Guthman** puts it, "the cultural power of what we believe is possible," is, as a result of this incumbent machinery, constrained from acting in the service of alternative ideas. **Tara Garnett** asks in the *What is Ecomodernism* event if technological and growth models of globalisation take up oxygen from alternative ideas. The protein challenge highlighted by Tamsin Blaxter in the kwashiorkor moment and protein fiasco, led to by a colonial cultural history of protein in relation to race and culture, and magnetically convenient in its suggestion that a global ill could be 'fixed' by the provision of sufficient protein products, was a mould – a challenge set in certain terms – that demanded a specific set of responses, and the solutions fit the mould rather than the problem. Clapp describes the reinforcement of a financialised and disproportionately corporate food system as a limit to innovation. On arguments about innovation from corporations, "It's only one kind of innovation, and it's crowding out those kind of innovations that are more ecologically grounded."

The corollary of a focus on the power embedded in and distributed by dynamics that limit alternatives is, across much of the material, a sense of frustration. For **Busiso Moyo**, those South African citizens not well supported by the current arrangement of power relations are already living in a different system which is hermetically separate from a more mainstream version: "We have a highly efficient, commercialised farming agriculture sector. And then we also have this food system that is anchored in rurality and peasant farming... there are those who experience the food system in South Africa in the same manner that someone in a first world country would experience the food system, and then there's those who experience the food system in a manner that someone in a warzone probably would have to interact with the food system." For **Julie Guthman**, alternative food system patterns are available under certain restrictive conditions but not as a choice embedded in current structures: "some who have the means or knowledge or wherewithal [can] opt out of the industrial food system, but they haven't really threatened the industrial food system." Alternatives happen in the margins, and represent an abdication rather than a real choice. A more hopeful view comes from **Reginaldo Haslett-Marroquin** and takes us back to food, at least as a metaphor: "The one we feed is the one that wins." This metaphor makes room for the more evasive forms of power – such as narrative – alongside the tangible, that might be 'fed', i.e. nourished, with words and attention as well as money and resource.

## Final Reflections

How should we evaluate the Power project? All our contributors agree, though they vary widely in diagnosis, prognosis and prescription, with TABLE's founding assumptions that the current system does not deliver the best outcomes for people or planet; they all want transformation of some kind. This theme considers the role of power in effecting that desired transformation. Power is a negotiation. While the impossibility of concretely defining power was clear to all contributors, yet the absence of a common remit, with which contributors would have to negotiate, is an obstacle to dialogue between pieces. Without agreement on the terms by which power will be judged, contributors were too free to talk past other perspectives, to dismiss too easily the foundations of another's view or to understand terms by their own interpretations rather than those of another speaker. To move from debate to dialogue, from talking *at* to engaging *with*, one must be willing to measure one's own power by metrics not of one's own devising, and our contributors generally spoke within a frame of their own construction. Thinking by another's metric need not be a permanent commitment to that metric's hierarchy, simply a turn of the kaleidoscope to see the same material another way.

Personal connection or experience is another obstacle to this dialogue. In the SCALE summary report, contributor background was identified as significant in how they understood scale. The same is true here, where personal experience not only informs, but prioritises. Jason Clay's background in farming informs his dismissal of small farming as a positive food system future: "I've lived on less than \$1 a day on a small farm for 15 years. And then my father was killed on that farm, and I had to run it. It's a tough life", and [Channa Prakash](#), professor in plant genetics, biotechnology and genomics, weaves his family history into his response to technology critics: "If it is not for the green revolution, I wouldn't be here talking to you, hundreds of millions of people like myself would have perished." Experience combines with evidence in ways that are closely bound up with trust.

The lenses discussed here help to distinguish approaches, but in reality they all exist simultaneously and come in and out of focus for contributors. It was particularly difficult to consider 'dynamics' without inadvertently removing agency, to acknowledge the limiting contexts within which actors operate without identifying this as an insurmountable constraint. On the other hand, responsibility morphs very quickly into blame, and is then to be disavowed – particularly in relation to one's own power. If we were to negotiate the terms of the Power project again, a distinction between responsibility as blame for past or present power operations, and responsibility as agency for change in the future, might be valuable. Blaxter notes of the debates surrounding Faroese whaling: "the way this conversation is carried out, it is all about power", then asks with a needle fit for puncturing if framing a conversation around power is really a helpful way to talk about that concept and its operation. When the conversation becomes descriptive of power, Blaxter found interviewees arguing in more polarised ways: "In some ways, it seems to me that the power framing is the really polarised framing of this. And that has made me wonder about how do you know whether framing things in terms of power will illuminate who has power and isn't using it? And when is it just a way of everyone putting up walls around themselves and saying we need to defend ourselves?"

This theme has made visible to us at TABLE some of the obstacles to an honest and open conversation about power. Through the materials that make up the Power theme, what we offer, then, is less a framing for more of those conversations than a toolbox – of questions, tensions, imbalances – for more power-sensitive, power-aware food systems debates. We welcome your thoughts. Comment, share and write to us.

## Sources

Name and piece (in order of appearance)	Appears in section	Sector
Phil Howard in <a href="#">Episode 20 on Corporate Consolidation</a> (Feed podcast)	Resources, Actors, Dynamics	Academic and author
Jayson Lusk in <a href="#">Episode 27 on Markets and Consumer power</a> (Feed podcast)	Actors, Dynamics	Academic and author
Philip McMichael in <a href="#">Episode 37 on The Corporate Food Regime</a> (Feed podcast)	Resources, Dynamics	Academic and author
Joachim Von Braun in <a href="#">Episode 29 on an IP for food</a> (Feed podcast)	Resources, Actors	Civil society (global)
Herman Brouwer and Joost Guijt in <a href="#">Episode 23 on Power in Multi-stakeholder Partnerships</a> (Feed podcast)	Resources, Actors	Academic, business
Busiso Moyo in <a href="#">Episode 28 on the Right to Food</a> (Feed podcast)	Resources	Academic
Lucy Vincent and Linda Kjær Minke in <a href="#">Episode 38 on Food in Prisons</a> (Feed podcast)	Resources, Dynamics	Civil society, academic
Blain Snipstal in <a href="#">Episode 32 on Battling Plantation Agriculture Today</a> (Feed podcast)	Resources	Civil society
Giuliana Furci in <a href="#">Episode 30 on Without Fungi We Wouldn't Have Food</a> (Feed podcast)	Resources	Civil society (global, conservation)
Reginaldo Haslett-Marroquin in <a href="#">Episode 34 on The Power of Regenerative Movements</a> (Feed podcast)	Resources, Dynamics	Private (farming), civil society
Jason Clay in <a href="#">Episode 36 on Building and Flying The Plane As We Go</a> (Feed podcast)	Resources	Civil society (global)
Jeremy Brice, <a href="#">Investment, Power and Protein in sub-Saharan Africa</a> (report) and in <a href="#">Episode 33 on Investment, Power and Protein in sub-Saharan Africa</a> (Feed podcast)	Resources, Actors	Academic
Jennifer Clapp in <a href="#">Episode 5 on Commodifying Food</a> (Feed podcast)	Resources, Dynamics	Academic
Julie Guthman in <a href="#">Episode 21 on Capital, Tech and Alternative Food</a> (Feed podcast)	Resources, Actors	Academic
Jessica Duncan in <a href="#">Jessica Duncan in Episode 51 on COP28 and who shapes food policy</a> (Feed podcast)	Actors	Academic
Rebecca Sanders, <a href="#">Use misuse and abuse: a vet reflects on animal exploitation</a> (essay)	Actors, Dynamics	Private (vet), academic
Sofia Wilhelmsson in <a href="#">Episode 35 on Pig Transport and Human-Animal Relations</a> (Feed podcast)	Actors	Academic
Tamsin Blaxter, <a href="#">Parsing Grindadráp</a> (essay), and in <a href="#">Episode 26: Parsing Grindadráp</a> (Feed podcast)	Actors	Academic
Alma Igra, <a href="#">Invasions, protections, and the legacy of empire in the animal kingdom</a> (essay)	Actors	Academic
Tamsin Blaxter and Tara Garnett, <a href="#">Where does protein get its power?</a> (essay)	Actors, Dynamics	Academic, civil society
Tamsin Blaxter & Tara Garnett, <a href="#">Primed for power: a short cultural history of protein</a> (report)	Actors, Dynamics	Academic, civil society
Channa Prakash in <a href="#">Episode 22 on GMs, Golden Rice and the Green Revolution</a> (Feed podcast)	Final Reflections	Academic
Francisco Rosado-May, Hassan Roba, Sara Farley, Tim Searchinger and Ken Giller in <a href="#">Whose knowledge counts?</a> (event)	Dynamics	Mixed
Linus Blomqvist and Sam Bliss in <a href="#">What is ecomodernism?</a> (event)	Resources	Mixed
Sahil Shah, Eddy Wax, Wendy Godek and Shefali Sharma in <a href="#">An open-ended discussion on power in the food system</a> (event)	Resources, Dynamics	Mixed



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