

**Section 6.**  
**Miscellaneous**



## The eat-er and the fed-er: Feeling, feeding and livestock in more-than-animal worlds

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### Abstract

What is the relationship between eating and being fed in today's food system? How does the food system use our need to eat to make us feed on what is in the interest of the market, as opposed to our health and the planet's? This paper troubles understandings of consumers as sovereign, choosy, abled *eat-ers*, to instead highlight geographies, relationalities, and conditions that create situated, bounded, disabled *fed-ers*. Suffering from an ableist bias, the conception of the consumer as an eat-er ignores the systemic disablement of fed-ers, and the multispecies injustices that emerge from current food systems. Inspired by disability justice work, cultural economy and food systems thinking we propose that accepting limits and boundedness as part of an intrinsically disabled human condition generates new paradigms and associated leverage points for food systems change.

**Keywords:** chicken, consumer, disability, food environment, food system thinking

### Introduction: The eat-er and the fed-er

What is the relationship between eating and being fed in today's food system? How does the food system use our need to eat, to make us feed on what is in the interest of the market, as opposed to our health or the planet's? This paper offers an analytic tool for exploring the power dynamics of food relations by troubling the currently dominant understanding of food consumers. The representation of the consumer as sovereign, choosy, carefully and thoughtfully selecting what they eat, communicates a powerful agent. Yet, the consumer is also fed. Indeed, eating practices are always possible to analyse as also already ones of being fed -if, minimally, by oneself.

But do I really *ever* feed myself by myself? Food, utensils, other animals' bodies, human and animal labour, transporting, my own work to buy food, and so on are all often implicated in feeding me. In these dialectics of eating as being fed, flipping the analytic script from one highlighting agency and ability, to one that instead notices boundedness, relationality, and disability holds, we propose, important potential for reconsidering current food system paradigms.

The narrative below is compiled by Roe based on her multi-sited fieldwork over the last 20 years involving ethnography and interviews. It introduces three sketches, each featuring a different fed-er, situated and founded within the poultry food system: an intensively farmed chicken, an imagined chicken carcass consumer, and actual consumers of cheap, hot, chicken-based meals. Paying particular attention to the lived experiences of these fed-ers the sketches join the chicken who is fed; the imagined chicken carcass consumer who is fed through the necessity to create chicken-based foodstuffs using also the less desired parts of the carcass; and the wonder of cheap, fast food chicken products' ubiquity on city high streets feeding those of us who have few or no options to cook for ourselves.

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In 2023, remotely, the poultry technician checks if the automated feed system for the shed of growing broiler chickens under their care has worked. Yes, the soy-bean, nutritionally-enhanced, specialist food, making chickens grow fast, and providing exceedingly efficient “feed to weight” conversion, is being pecked up and eaten.

As today, back in 2006, live birds are culled for meat in a poultry processing plant, while all the parts of the chicken that -in the words of a processor — “need to find a mouth to eat them, as its cheaper than putting them in the ground” — become apparent: breast and wing, thighs and drumsticks (legs), heads, beak, feet, giblets (neck, heart, liver and gizzard). Who have they been fed to? Who will they feed today? How are they manufactured so, what is culturally considered the least tasty, less familiar ingredient for home-cooking, becomes instead a desirable manufactured chicken-based food to buy for your baby, cat, or you?

In 2015, from conversations with those in receipt of emergency food aid, it emerges that, with what little money they do have available, it is fast food chicken meals that are their go-to meal option. Cheap, nutritious, hot, (highly valued if you struggle to afford cooking at home), and ubiquitous on the high-street. This is the treat: a drink of Bourbon and a KFC, on a Friday.

A picture emerges of different bodies being fed by the poultry and associated industries. What these bodies are fed varies, but it is connected to the production and consumption of the commercially produced, living chicken. Instead of thinking of these consumers as buyers, with limited power, rethinking this relationship as one of feeding and caring highlights the failures of the concept of the eat-er to identify and imagine where responsibilities lie to support the health and wellbeing of fed-ers and the lives entangled with theirs.

Importantly, we think about the predicament of the fed-er in a feminist, emancipatory mode: for whilst we first identify the fed-er with lived experiences of dis-ability - including confinement, entrapment, information deficit, financial deficit, skills-deficit, choice-deficits - we consider how such forms of disability could be recognised as cutting across class and species, and unexpectedly as a resource for the future. Our analysis is inspired by disability justice activist and writer Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, who call/s out in the title of their/her latest book: *The future is disabled* (2022). Piepzna-Samarasinha imagine/s a future where everyone is disabled not as the stuff of science fiction doom, but as a new utopia recognising and accepting disability as a resource which is binding humans -and we add nonhumans. Considering disability justice responses to the Covid-19 pandemic, or endemic, Piepzna-Samarasinha show/s how disabled knowledge, skills and experiences inspired and generated a diversity of more effective ‘care tactics’ (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2022: p. 102) than those offered by ableist care paradigms.

This knowledge coming from disability studies is crucial also for today’s food studies. For, besides several modes of disablement that are unwarranted, unjust, and unnecessarily imposed by the current food system, there are arguably necessary limits and bounds that need to be imposed within any sustainable food system (e.g., Cué Rio, 2022). This suggests that fed-er subjectivities and experiences need to become more openly embraced as a new food reality -and, why not, a future food utopia.

In sum, our paper introduces the novel political figure of ‘the fed-er’ which we offer as a generative, theoretically and empirically developed conceptual elaboration to the figure of the ‘consumer’. We next situate this idea in food systems thinking (Black *et al.*, 2024) and cultural economy (Callon, 1998) juxtaposing the figure of the fed-er with that of an imagined actively and independently consuming eat-er (next section). Then, we explore affinities between human and nonhuman fed-ers, and the roles

of feed-ers in this system. In conclusion we return to the idea of a disabled food utopia, caring for both human and nonhuman fed-ers.

## Enacting the consumer through a food systems lens: From eat-er to fed-er

Consumers are defined operationally through their participation as presumed users/buyers of goods within food market systems. A food consumer is typically defined in dictionaries as one who buys food from the market, or as one who feeds by eating others, plants or animals. We suggest that understandings of the consumer focusing on their market activity and impact, rather than how the food system shapes their performances, ignore important details about how this figure is also fed, as much as, or even while acting to feed themselves. In this rethinking we are inspired by previous work in *cultural economy*, *feminist epistemology* and *food systems*.

A range of social science research is orientated around conceptualising and studying the behaviours, perceptions and attitudes of consumers, who are held up as important agents for change within dominant conceptions of market systems. Michel Callon's radical approach to understanding markets (1998), and processes of 'economisation' (Çalışkan and Callon, 2009) as culturally contingent and socially 'performed' inspires our analysis of food markets.

Economisation is a set of processes that constitutes behaviours, organisations, institutions and those things labelled as 'economic' to bring cultural or other material values into existing socio-technical economic infrastructures. For example, from a cultural economy perspective, farm animal welfare is 'performed' within the market for animal products, becoming economised and thus measure-able in terms of costs and pricing. In this sense, as Buller and Roe (2013) argue, it is possible to understand agri-food systems change as connected to how an organisation of 'the market' constitutes when something is 'economic', e.g. when food waste attains a value again.

Though the concept of the consumer is 'economised' in Callon's terms, or more broadly 'founded' in this scientific practice (Efsthathiou, 2016), it is culturally contingent and possible to perform differently through future, emancipatory, scientific work. A relational food systems perspective offers this opportunity. Conceiving activity beyond 'the market' as important for studying food, the idea of a 'food system' organises the diverse set of elements that come into the making, provision, processing, consumption, and afterlives of food (Black *et al.*, 2024).

'A food system gathers all the elements (environment, people, inputs, processes, infrastructures, institutions, etc) and activities that relate to the production, processing, distribution, preparation and consumption of food, and the output of these activities, including socio-economic and environmental outcomes.' (HLPE 2017: 23)

Importantly, rather than imagining different elements of the food system organising themselves, food systems thinking understands the food system as open to a set of complex relations that organise the system internally, but also externally, in relation to the wider political economy and environmental structures (Allen and Prosperi 2016; Brunori *et al.*, 2020: p. 42; Sage, 2022).

Once one starts to operate with a relational, 'systems' vision of the construct of 'the consumer' and 'consumption' dominant presumptions regarding the agency of the consumer, and of consumption as identity-defining begin to appear problematic: It gets harder to distinguish an agentive consumer from the system that, in the case of the food system, feeds them.

An existing concept to explain the geographic specificities of food access in relation to diet, is referred to as the 'food environment' (Vogel *et al.*, 2017). This concept helps examine relationships between food outlet access and diet, and how consumers' situated access affects the nature and quality of the food available to them. Following this conceptual innovation one can think further that 'food environments' include, besides 'food outlets', a broader range of factors that shape the situatedness of distributed 'food system outputs' to a 'fed-er'.

The figure of the fed-er thus emerges as the flipside of the 'eat-er'. Imagined as operating in a food environment of abundance, choice and access, which facilitates, indeed encourages, their eating abilities, the eat-er perhaps embodies what Derrida identifies as the 'carnophallogocentric' subject, enacting a kind of masculinist-ableist-rationalist-anthropocentric myth of market agency and entitlement in self-fulfilled satiety (Derrida 1991; Adams and Calarco, 2016). Contrastingly, being fed is almost tautologous to being helpless. We are fed when we are infants or young children, patients, disabled, or perhaps in intimacy with our friends and lovers. Indeed, being fed can be comforting: It can be part of attending to and nourishing those we care for. Yet being fed and accepting to be fed contravene the sense of autonomy that eaters are presumed or often presume themselves to have. In a contemporary cultural context where autonomy, freedom, self-determination and self-sufficiency are prominent moral-political values it is no surprise that the fed-er remains a figure that is uncelebrated, and less discussed.

### Vulnerable fed-ers and our feed-ers

We have described some limitations of the dominant market-based concept of the consumer as eat-er, suggesting that food systems thinking helps reconceive the concept of consumer, to acknowledge and identify the fed-er: the one who is fed by the system, as opposed to the one who buys their food of choice. However, the figure of 'the fed-er' became at first apparent to us, and felt, empirically, in those whose ability to eat appears to be bounded by corporate, financial, social, ecological or other situations of scarcity. These actors' agentive potential as eat-ers is in certain ways dis-abled. Their demonstrable dependence on being fed by systems and sources outside their control made it suitable to characterise their roles and subjectivities as ones of fed-ers.

Whilst it is not the case that there is a lack of food diversity in European national food systems, for significant population segments, access to food is restricted by place, price-points and promotions, and the affective lure of selling food through advertising. For example, in the UK 17% of the population were food insecure in June 2023 (Food Foundation, 2024). The proportion of people in Europe who cannot afford a 'proper' meal with fish, meat or a vegetarian equivalent every second day is also increasing, at 8.3% in 2022, up one percent from 2021, with the proportion significantly higher at 19.7%, on average, for people at risk of poverty (Eurostat, 2023).

It is perhaps easier to witness the frailty of the consumer as eat-er in the context of these human mouths, whose agency as buyers of food is compromised. These are not eat-ers as we have known them, since their capacity to buy is compromised by the failings of the Welfare State to give them money, for example in the UK. Instead, charitable giving, as money or donated food from individuals or retailers feeds them.

This is one extreme questioning the concept of consumers as eat-ers. Vulnerable consumers become 'disabled', since what they are able to eat, is contingent on what they can access in the market. But doesn't this contingency apply to the majority of us, not just those in receipt of emergency food aid? To what degree, even under 'normal' food system relationships does our agentive potential as consumers qualify us as fed-ers? Especially in urbanised food environments, our opportunities to develop, cultivate and exercise food skills and agencies for a self-determined, autonomous procuring, preparing, preserving, and

providing of our meals seem to be systematically (conveniently) delegated to others (farmers, retailers, restaurants, fast food chains, food delivery actors, etc.).

But there are also other fed-ers in contemporary food systems, whose agency and autonomy are compromised as an intrinsic feature of intensified, homogenous feeding systems and processes. Welfare scientists are looking into releasing insects into chicken houses, as a form of ‘enrichment’, as contemporary feeding practices do not enhance poultry lives, just maintain them. Considering food systems as multispecies structures, the figure of the livestock animal whose flesh, body processes and labour are integral to whom, how and what feeds is themselves a cornerstone fed-er, a being who is fed, to grow into food, for more fed-ers.

Taking the broiler meat chicken as an example, these purpose-bred meat birds receive a soya-bean, nutrient-enhanced diet to achieve the optimum feed conversion ratio i.e. minimal amount of feed input for maximum growth rate. On these diets their weight-gain is rapid, reaching culling weight between 35–40 days depending on intended market. This chicken breed has been selected for their large appetite that can become disastrous if they live beyond 40 days, as their body can’t be physically sustained with good welfare without severely limiting their diets.

Exploring systemic entanglements and interdependencies through the ‘consumer’ as fed-er makes apparent the affinities between human and non-human fed-ers. Indeed, one might say that, in the historical evolution of current intensified animal-based food systems, the process through which the figure of the ‘consumer’ comes into play — as the carrier of an already lost ability as food-maker- is the same process through which nonhuman animals, come to be progressively, in the billions, confined, dis-abled and fed, to become food for human fed-ers (cf. Vialles, 1994, Weis, 2013).

Finally, there are some other trends in the organisation of retailing that suggest the overstated agency of the consumer in currently dominant frames. In certain food categories— supply chains are vertically integrated: That is, producer-wholesaler-retailer are coordinated by one branded company, and in some cases with few competitors, while a semblance of choice is offered through product segmentation and tiering. Food actors operating such vertically integrated value chains constitute organisational structures that perform what we think of as ‘the feed-er’. As those who expect and imagine ‘mouths to feed’ (cf. our second empirical story), these actors come to hold a lot of power and responsibility for feeding and enacting fed-ers. They become ‘the feed-ers’ of fed-ers — human and not.

Whilst this argument about the power and responsibility of the handful of corporations that manage the majority flow of global commodities has been made before in the context of the UK (Lang 2020), there has been less confidence in the academic literature to ask important questions about what fate this holds for the idea of a consumer-buyer.

## Conclusion: Potentials in disability

Eating is a complex set of social-material relationships with a generative potential for theory (Mol, 2021). We have argued that the figure of the food consumer understood as an eat-er becomes lacking when seen from a feminist, cultural food systems perspective that respects and recognises disability as a site of knowledge and action. In our analysis, the figure of the eat-er starts to become apparent when considering ‘eaters’ who are vulnerable, such as humans and animals with constrained food access. But this finding has wider ramifications. It asks: Aren’t all living bodies fed? To what extent are food environments adequately open, diverse, accessible enough to fed-ers? Who, when and what should be doing the feeding? And what is the responsibility of actors holding the power to feed, in this account?

What emerges in the end is an affinity, a kinship in vulnerability between fed-ers, animals, human and nonhuman, which the food system as a feeding system plays into. But this vulnerability, also comes with openings of care, responsibility, and resourcefulness. As a quality of disablement is identified in the practices of the fed-er, consumer-buyer empowerment is contained, bordered and situated. This highlights an emancipatory view of fed-ers as subjects who know how to make do with less, who have cultivated skills, networks, 'care tactics' (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2022), and workarounds precious for all of us responding to the polycrises threatening our planet.

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