

Food Justice or/= Social Justice?

Systemic Exclusion and discrimination: Do we respond by raising issues of Access and Equity or Advocate for Transformation.

As an Faculty member who teaches about social justice, ethics, and combating and resisting systems of marginalization, exclusion and oppression, I often find it incredibly important for students and myself to recognize and reflect on how historically institutionalized, internalized, and practiced forms of discrimination have implicated all of us in its machinery in some way, shape or form. This of course is how systems of oppression and exclusion maintain themselves. Since those that benefit are often a few, the system needs accomplices and believers in order to continue its project(s).

I often reference Antonio Gramsci and Gayatri Spivak for their example or idea of “subalterity”- referring to those who have been historically jettisoned outside the lines of social mobility and often at the same time have been forced to internalize interests outside of (and often oppositional to) their own interest.

An example that I will use until we change it is the problem of food justice at McMaster University.

For some time I have heard of similar kinds of complaints:

- 1) Kosher and Halal foods are difficult to access not only for students but for catered staff and faculty events. Food services often request multiple days of advanced notice to provide these items (I'm not even sure what I want for lunch today).
- 2) Food diversity is lacking, e.g., no West-Indian options are available and Bridges only has vegetarian and vegan options.
- 3) Why do “ethnic” foods need to be served in separate locations from mainstream food services?
- 4) Food is very expensive on campus and Grocery stores are not accessibly/safely walkable for many students.

When raised, we often present the issue of equal or equitable access. The response: the “high cost” of providing “specialized” food for *few* is announced as the “reason” for not making kosher and halal foods more abundant, regularly available, affordable and easy to access. Some accept this, even the extreme suggestion that these kind of provision would bankrupt food services. This consideration attends to the high cost for the institution at the expense of a consideration of the high cost of food for students. The McMaster Bread Bin (the local student food hamper/food bank program) is being used more and more as students struggle with greater needs and increasing costs.

So we are left with the same issues. Certain already marginalized, minority groups are faced with lesser access to the foods they require and often have to spend more time and resources in order to have an equitably abundant and available food. Ethnic and spiritually/religiously observant foods are “segregated” to specialized locations at the university and the high cost of food (basic food security) on campus in general is silenced.

But what if we shifted our focus, changed our ask, reframed the issue? Rather than fight for “the same”, or “equal” maybe we fight for a *new* system, one that doesn't accept excuses for things that could impede a groups' opportunity to be educated at a public institution because of their beliefs or who they are.

Recently advocacy efforts have resulted in some changes. There are some kosher products including sandwiches and danishes available a few days per week. There is also a couple of new South Asian cuisine options available if you can afford the \$10.99 plus tax for it. Is this significant change or more of a set-up? One that will result in an eventual reporting of low sales (how often can one eat only sandwiches and Danish? Or spend \$10.99 plus tax on lunch?) and a discontinuation of the provision.

Currently, the system as is, is being sustained through our internalization or passive acceptance (although there are many who are continually resistant to this) of the belief that “catering” to a few is too costly. This belief is *outside* of our own interests as users of food services and members of the McMaster community. The more food services become diversified and accessible, maybe the more students from minority and marginalized groups will apply to attend McMaster-rendering it quite economical. Perhaps providing “ethnic” foods across campus locations will actually lower costs as more people have access to them. Maybe, providing the foods that people need, **no matter what the cost is the right thing to do and if the current food services program can’t deliver this, we need to change the program.**

The outcomes we are currently facing are:

- 1) Tyranny of the majority: We endorse a rationale that providing for minorities is “too” costly to the majority therefore we should pretend they don’t exist.
- 2) Divisive politics: We refute and ignore the knowledge that investing in inclusive/accessible/ethical service provision increases inclusion
- 3) Privileged access to education: We maintain an overall education system that is more difficult to access if you are of a minority racialized or ethnic group.
- 4) Historically sanctioned exclusion: We maintain a system of historically justified discrimination and oppression
- 5) We reinforce a colourblind/neoliberal mentality that assumes this is only about costs (rather than race, class, or creed etc.) and only cost matters.

These issues and their outcomes are not just about food as a commodity and its costs. This is about who is advantaged in our systems of higher education and who is disadvantaged (including staff and faculty). This is about historically sanctified systems and practices of discrimination that have been internalized and accepted as logical and rational despite the long history of counter knowledge and resistance.

A system that systemically disadvantages a people by race and creed is a racist discriminatory system. This is a system that needs to go. At some point in the discussion, it should be brought up that a request for proposals requesting diverse, accessible, affordable, ethical food options maybe to just a good idea, but imperative to this University’s “commitment” to building inclusive communities.

Food justice = Social justice

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