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# Intergenerational Knot: eating meat in contexts of inequality

Mariana Hase Ueta

The **Food for Justice Working Paper Series** serves to disseminate the first results of ongoing research projects in the field of power, politics and food inequalities in a bioeconomy in order to encourage the exchange of ideas and academic debate.

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**FOOD FOR JUSTICE: POWER, POLITICS AND FOOD INEQUALITIES IN A BIOECONOMY**

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## Abstract

The Anthropocene is not only a period of rapid environmental transformation but also a prolific moment of values changes. While the temporality dimensions of this phenomenon are a challenge to social sciences inquiry, it also presents a great opportunity for new methodologies to emerge. The intergenerational knot can be a useful methodological frame for understanding social change through the discussion of different values across different generations because, at the same time, it evidences differences and disagreement; it also carries the potential of mutually influencing and multiplying new food consumption practices. The present article focuses on intergenerational discussions through the case study of meat consumption. The young generation analyzed usually prioritizes environmental impact when choosing what to eat, however, other factors exert more significant influence on the family food consumption, such as their experiences of food deprivation, their views of what a “better life” consists, and their experience of social mobility. Therefore, first-hand ethnographic data was collected from university students who negotiated between personal values and family narratives around their household meat consumption in Campinas, São Paulo, Brazil. The intergenerational knot becomes a useful methodological frame to understand values change in social and environmental transformation processes in an inclusive way.

 **KEY-WORDS:** Generation; Family; Dialogue; Food; Meat; Inequality; Methodology.

## Short biography

**Mariana Hase Ueta** is a Postdoctoral Researcher at Wageningen University & Research, developing interdisciplinary work at the intersection of food sociology, sustainable diets, and emerging technologies and seeking to further a relational understanding of how these are co-constituted. Over the last few years, Dr. Hase Ueta has also been working on issues related to sustainable food consumption, intergenerational discussion, and comparative sociology in the Global South. The present discussion is part of her research stay with the research group "Food for Justice" in Germany in 2020, that greatly contributed to her Ph.D. research "O sabor da prosperidade: diálogos intergeracionais sobre consumo alimentar e impacto ambiental" defended in 2021 at the University of Campinas (UNICAMP) and funded by CAPES doctoral scholarship and, Fulbright and DAAD grants.

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# Introduction

Picture of meat retrieved from Unsplash. Megan Thomas.

The Anthropocene is not only a period of rapid environmental transformation but also a prolific moment of values changes. In the face of climate emergency, different actors respond in various ways. While the temporality dimensions of this phenomenon are a challenge to social sciences inquiry, it also presents a great opportunity for new methodologies to emerge. So, how can social sciences investigate the tensions that emerge between different groups in the context of social change? The present article focuses on intergenerational discussions through the case study of meat consumption. While the young generation analyzed usually prioritise environmental impact when choosing what to eat, the older generation relates it to memories of deprivation and class mobility as well as dreams of achieving a better life. In short, my research question is: what are the meanings of meat consumption that are created in the encounter between different generations? These different perspectives are crucial in understanding processes of social change and developing more inclusive strategies in the context of climate change.

This discussion draws from scholarship on food justice and connects to anthropological scholarship on knots. In contexts of social change, the contrast between different generations' values becomes more evident. In order to understand social change in an inclusive way, it is important to consider the different values shaped by different historical experiences. If each individual [in its memories, values, and experience] is understood as a line, the knot would show the tensions and conflicts between different family members and the contrasts between intergenerational perspectives. Through the knot, it is possible not only to see the different perspectives, but also how they get negotiated. Therefore, first-hand ethnographic data was collected from university students who are young consumers who negotiated between personal values and family narratives around their household meat consumption in the city of Campinas, São Paulo, Brazil. These university students recognised that in addition to the information they brought to their family, other factors exert more significant influence, such as their experiences of food deprivation, their views of what a "better life" consists, and their experience of social mobility.

The knot is the ideal locus to understand social change through the discussion of different values, because, at the same time that it evidences the difference and disagreement, it also shows the effort and willingness to negotiate in order to maintain the ties. While the intergenerational encounter can result in conflict, it also carries the potential of mutually influencing and multiplying new food consumption practices. The knot, in this sense, becomes a useful methodological frame to understand values change in social and environmental transformation processes in an inclusive way.

This work is divided into five parts. Firstly, I present the knot as a methodological frame and discuss how the knot has been used in social science methodological scholarship. In the second part, I situate my discussion in the Brazilian context of food inequalities, and in dialogue with the emerging field of sustainable diets. The third part is dedicated to describing the data collection and analysis. The fourth part shows the results and discussion on the meat narratives, which are constructed collectively by different generations. I also present the main categories that emerged from the interviews regarding the conflictive perceptions of the meanings of eating meat. Finally, in the conclusion, I show how meat consumption is entangled in these families' lives and tell the stories of deprivation, class mobility, and, ultimately, the emergence of new values in the context of the Anthropocene.



Picture of Brazilian typical food retrieved from Pixabay. Claudio Henrique.

# 1 | Knot as a methodological frame

Picture of meat retrieved from Unsplash. Evan Wise.

Bringing the idea of the knot can be a way to understand contexts of change. Changes do not happen in a vacuum, they are entangled with historical developments: they do not follow a positivist progression, and they involve constant tension and discussion between actors with different world views. The idea of the knot shows the effort to keep relations tied and the avoidance of a moment of total break of the family bonds like the Gordian Knot, which would be a complex situation only solved by cutting the ties.

The knot is a useful frame to understand contexts of changing traditions while keeping bonds between different generations – it shows the effort to translate and accommodate change involving different actors. For example, it can be a helpful frame to understand climate change as it demands a change of behaviour that was oftentimes held as traditional before. Climate change can be faced as a challenge that different generations are going to respond to. It is not a matter of attributing responsibility to the old generation while giving the agency of change only to the younger generation. It is a complex challenge that should be discussed between generations and involving different actors in the process of change.

Drawing from Tim Ingold's work on lines, he understands lines in the context of weaving and entanglements. He explains the genealogical line as: „the life of every being is the gradual growing beyond, or supersession, of its ancestors in the process of becoming its descendant“ (Ingold, 2016, p.117). These genealogical lines imply a one-directional transmission. However, I argue that lines can get entangled by pointing in different directions, forming a knot. Ingold (2017) also refers to knots, but in his case regarding blocks and structures. I would like to stick to the kinship context that the author brings in Ingold (2016), and draw my discussion about intergenerational knots.

There are also other works using the idea of knot in Anthropology. Green (2014) uses the idea of knot in her work „Anthropological Knots“ that explore what is that makes anthropology possible in the contemporary moment, and what counts as intervention in anthropological terms. The discussion on „Anthropological Knots“ shows how this idea can be used in methodological discussions, especially regarding ethnography.



Strathern (2014) adds to this discussion by focusing on the description of relations. According to the author, relations became an object of description, and thus of knowledge too by involving the „separation between enactments of relating (i.e. being kin, such as being brothers in law) and the objectification of the concept of relations, as such: the concept became different from the enactment (or its social existence), and in that sense, spawned the possibility of description, and thus intervention“. [Green, 2014, p. 13] While Carrither (2014) argues that neither the theories used to explain it, nor the ethnographic descriptions themselves, but the attempts to comprehend something different are what fascinates people with ethnography.

I would like to focus on the very moment that the knot is tied. In that moment, when the lines of different generational narratives, world views and social values meet, is the moment to understand dialogue, tensions and change. The configurations of all the different lines after the knot will be defined by the moment of entanglement. How the entanglement gets addressed will impact the possibility of the lines to continue existing intertwined.



Picture of vegetables and meat retrieved from Pixabay. Roberto Justo Kabana.

## 2 | Concepts and theoretical framework: Situating the knot

Picture of meat retrieved from Unsplash. Victoria Shes.

### 2.1. Knot and inequality: Knot as a way to show the entanglements involved in food justice

The knot presents the possibility to understand the coexistence of different perspectives in contexts of inequality. The different historical experiences that the subjects have gone through shape the ways they understand what „good food“ is. Motta [2021] alerts that new forms of social distinction arise from these new trends of ethical and political consumption, where „good food“ is associated with access to information and high income. In understanding the practices linked to sustainability, it is necessary to go beyond the individualized understanding of behavior change and understand that these subjects build their values and food consumption practices beyond the choice based on an analysis of costs and benefits, which means that eating is also cultural, and shaped by socioeconomic opportunities and constraints.

Goodman, Dupuis and Goodman [2012] argue that defining an „ideal diet“, while privileging some individuals and bringing benefits to them, would also exclude others. Thus, they believe that reflexivity should guide the discussion about food, which means that the focus should be on the process (even if imperfect) of construction of diets rather than the establishment of crystallized norms to be followed indiscriminately. Thus, the authors present the concept of food justice that values contexts and their inequalities in order to build an inclusive path to transform food systems. The concept of food justice recognizes that there is no ideal diet or an ideal path toward transforming food systems for all people [Goodman et. al, 2012]. In the context of the present discussion, I call attention to the danger of judging the way that older generations eat by the new generations' values (constructed in a different social-economic-historical context and with information and awareness regarding the environmental impact of food). In order to have an inclusive approach to sustainable diets, it is crucial to discuss different generations' perceptions of food consumption.

According to Alkon [2012], food studies have considered cultural aspects of food, such as identity formation and food heritage, even though it struggles to recognize that such relationships are structured by institutionalized inequalities of material resources and decision-making power. Therefore, he proposes the concept of food justice:



As popular attention to the health and environmental risks of industrial agriculture increases, it becomes necessary to understand the ways in which inequalities are embedded in food systems. Drawing on the fields of environmental justice, critical race theory, food studies, and sustainable agriculture, food justice research explores how racial and economic inequalities manifest themselves in food production, distribution, and consumption, and how communities and social movements shape and are shaped by these inequalities. As an emerging field, it has the potential to enrich both social theory and social change [Alkon, 2012, p. 295].

In light of the large environmental impact of food consumption, the path towards transformation to more sustainable food systems must consider the intersectionalities and contexts of inequality in which the subjects involved are inserted. According to Motta [2021], research on social movements and food initiatives contribute to the understanding of social change processes to the extent that it identifies inequality dynamics in food systems and contributes to their transformation.

Motta [2021] asserts that the concept of food inequalities is central to identifying injustices and dynamics of inequality in food systems and actively engaging in transforming these. The author argues it is important to incorporate [1] multiple structural forces [socioeconomic, sociopolitical, socioecological, and cultural]; [2] a multiscale and relational perspective; [3] plural and intersectoral inequalities; and [4] dynamics of transformation.

In the context of inequality in Brazil, food is a marker of social and class differentiation. According to Belik [2020], food is one of the main indicators of socioeconomic inequality in Brazil:

In families earning up to 2 minimum wages, the average monthly expenditure on food per person - inside and outside the home - is R\$120.86. For families earning more than 25 minimum wages, each person spends R\$671.45 per month. What is even more serious is the impact of food on the family budget. While in the richest families this expense represents only 5% of the total income, among the poorest families food has a huge weight: 26% [Belik, 2020, p. 5].

In a reality where access to food is not universal, commensality [the practice of sharing a meal] occupies a central place in establishing, maintaining, and expanding social networks, and food plays an important role in celebrations and daily life among friends and family. Food not only establishes bonds, but is also a marker of social and class differentiation. While some popular expressions, such as „despensa cheia“ [full pantry], „mesa farta“ [full table], and „botar comida dentro de casa“ [bring food into the house] denote the issue of abundance, they also evidence the experience of deprivation [Zaluar, 1982]. In other words, when considering the Brazilian perspective, it is crucial that the concept of sustainable diet and food justice are inseparable.



## ◆ 2.2. Definition of sustainable diets

Sustainable food emerges as an important path to building food chains that value not only human health and needs but also the environment. The EAT-Lancet paper published by Willett et al. (2019) was an important landmark in defining sustainable diets and presents the environmental impact of the production and consumption of certain groups of foods. This document made important contributions to discussing more sustainable food options that can help combat climate change by addressing issues related to human health, agriculture, political science, and environmental sustainability. This movement advocates for food consumption as fundamental to decreasing human environmental impact, and identifies foods that have the greatest environmental impact, such as meat, and makes recommendations to reduce its consumption.

Sustainable diets have been associated with consuming foods with lower environmental impact, as Heller and Keoleian (2014) calculate that in the context of the United States, the omnivorous diet would be responsible for emitting 5kg of greenhouse gases (CO<sub>2</sub>eq capita-1day-1) and the ovo-lacto-vegetarian diet emitted 33% and the vegan diet 53% less greenhouse gases.

However, this document must be understood in its context, in other words, as a “situated knowledge”. As Donna Haraway (1991) explains, all kinds of knowledge are situated in their contexts of production, and thus their authors produce knowledge about the reality they know from their personal experiences and intersectional position. According to Triches (2021), studies on sustainable diets have been growing in the last decade and are still concentrated in Europe. Thus, this knowledge must be understood in its temporal and geographic situatedness. The socio-economic development of Europe carries its own historical experience with food deprivation and access, which diverges from the current experience of different countries in the Global South. In this sense, the concepts and recommendations built in these contexts can not easily be enforced in other regions of the globe, especially countries struggling with ramping social and economic inequality. The colonial legacy concedes legitimacy to discourses constructed in the Global North; however, in order to construct just and sustainable transitions, it is crucial to question these knowledges and build understandings from the Global South. The construction of the concept of “sustainable diets” is permeated by worldviews and time-specific perspectives, where due to the novelty of the debate, the youth is the generational group that engages the most.

## ◆ 2.3. Sustainable diets in contexts of inequality

Guthman and Dupuis [2006] warn about the danger of “politics of perfection”, that is when some specific subjects define “a right way of living” from the values they deem appropriate for themselves, preaching this way as universal so that all groups can follow and benefit from it. However, disregarding the differences between groups only reinforces the inequalities and power places of those who have defined what is “right”. This process may lead to the normalization and universalization of ideas, in this case regarding food, that serve only those who created them and generate new exclusions when reaching different people in different places around the world.

Guthman [2008] shows that the “lack of knowledge”, or in other words, the lack of access to information, is pointed out as one of the main challenges for the transformation of food systems, and in this sense access to information would be a direct trigger for behavior change. However, assuming access to information as the only problem prevents a deeper look into the inequalities in which each individual is embedded. The author points out that campaigns aimed at inclusion often have as their slogan “invite others to sit at the table,” without considering, on the one hand, who these “others” are and what challenges they face in reaching the table and, on the other hand, who is “setting the table,” that is, whose values are being considered at this table: this table makes which people feel comfortable while excluding which others? Allen [2008] also warns that promoting individual consumer behaviour, as if the transformation of the food system depended on each person’s consumption decision, erases the historical processes of construction of social and economic inequalities in which subjects are inserted. The individualized accountability and the emphasis on the issue of health and the environment to the detriment of the social-economic-cultural approach to food also lead to the erasure of the ways in which these actions connect and impact different people across the supply networks around the world.

In the case of the present article, as the discussions and dissemination of ideas related to sustainable diets are a fairly recent phenomenon, it can show how the younger generation engages more in contrast to the older generation that might not be familiar with these ideas. The dialogue between them can be captured by the idea of the knot.

Different generations had different experiences of food consumption. According to Koselleck [2004, p. 269] “Generations did live in the same experiential space, but their perspective was interrupted according to political generation and social standpoint”. This discussion follows the frame of Guo Yuhua [2000], who points to the need to think about food consumption through the generational key. The author argues that the different historical experiences lived by the generation shape different discourses around food.

## ◆ 2.4. Why youth? Interviewing university students

In the present discussion, I take the youth as a group that has been engaging and contributing to the discourses of sustainable diets and research how they engage with the older generations. The group of youth interviewed for this research was composed of university students in Campinas, São Paulo, Brazil. The choice of university students was that at this age many of them are no longer living with their families, they had different opportunities and more agency in choosing what to eat, and at the same time, in the Brazilian context, these students still shared meals with their family frequently and engaged in discussions about what they were eating.

It is important to point out that the “younger generation” and the “older generation” are not homogeneous categories, and inequality and intersectionality are experienced across these groups. In the context of this research, I interviewed young university students and, when sharing their family experience, as they contrasted the life narratives of their parents and grandparents with their own, showed social mobility across the generations, with increasing access to food and changing values regarding it.

According to Collins and Hitchings (2012), regarding consumption, young people are not only the social group most susceptible to change, but also represent the possibility of expanding change. “Tomorrow’s leaders are already today’s consumers” (Collins and Hitchings, 2012, p. 193) demonstrates the idea that young people’s values impact their consumption patterns and it will reflect in the future, and the authors also believe that they act in the present as “Trojan horses” bringing new information and engaging their networks with new behaviors.

Food reaches daily mass media and public conversations, and increasingly becomes a marker of political positioning, especially amongst the youth, such as in recent debates about meat consumption and climate change. Citizens are not only talking about food and changing their individual eating behaviours due to political and ethical considerations, they are establishing collective ways of promoting alternative relations of food production, distribution, preparation, consumption and waste (Motta, 2021, p. 604).

## 2.5. Why meat? Perspectives from the Brazilian context

Meat was chosen to be the focus point of this knot due to the heated debates around its consumption (or lack of consumption). In the context of climate change, meat carries the stigma of having a high environmental impact. According to Carvalho (2012), in the production of 1 kg of beef 44 kg of greenhouse gases and 2400 liters of water are generated. “Food is responsible for 25% of the world’s ecological footprint, with the consumption of food of animal origin accounting for 61% of this value, and 33% refers to meat consumption, thus being the largest contributor” [Carvalho, 2012, p. 18]. In the debate on sustainable food, meat has become one of the main foods targeted for consumption reduction.

According to Nordgren (2012), the act of eating meat acquires a morally reprehensible character in view of its negative environmental impact. These consumers have to deal with the negative stigma around individual meat consumption created by the discourse of environmental sustainability, which argues that the processes behind increased meat production have a major impact on greenhouse gas emissions and are linked to deforestation and droughts [Gill et al., 2015].

The debate on the urgencies of the global environmental situation, while demanding transnational mitigation efforts, often disregard the agency and network of inequalities that these subjects are part of.

### 2.5.1. Nutritional transition

Brazilian population has been going through changes in their food consumption throughout the last decades, a phenomenon called dietary transition. The dietary transition consists of the process of changing the diet from traditional patterns [which vary according to the cultural context] to diets rich in sugar, fat, animal products and processed food [Popkin and Shu, 2007]. Low- and middle-income countries have experienced this process very quickly, generating changes in their consumption patterns, activities and health repercussions, such as rising obesity rates. The choice of meat [protein of animal origin, aggregated as in the FAO marker, which includes beef, chicken, fish, pork and seafood, and does not include dairy products] as the product to be analyzed is due to its central place in the Brazilian diet [Zaluar, 1982] as an important cultural symbolic marker, being a sign of class ascension and a better life and also a crucial element in relations of sociability - being part of the daily diet - and celebration [for example, the barbecue]. Brazil is a major consumer of meat [97 kg/capita/year]. This increase in the volume consumed has a global environmental impact [Escher, 2018] through global production and supply chains defined as teleconnections [Gill et al., 2015].

This means not only that the diet of a Brazilian person could have changed throughout the years [it is also important that Brazil remains a highly unequal country], but also that different generations had different experiences regarding food availability and scarcity.

## ◆ 2.5.2 Vegetarianism

Regarding the emergence of new food narratives, the country also experienced an increase in its vegetarian and vegan communities, that incorporate the environmental factor in their discourses, according to the Brazilian Vegetarian Society [SBV]. Non-meat diets have been associated with religious food taboos [such as Buddhism and Hinduism], ethics and the animal rights movement [Singer, 1973], and inter-species relationships [Ingold, 2013]. These movements have been appropriated and resignified and have also added new agendas such as the racial issue [Carmo, 2019], the issue of food safety [Yan, 2012], and also the issue of planetary health in the fight against zoonoses and pandemic spreads.

Within the food issue, vegetarianism is ambivalent: on one hand, it represents the hyper-rationalization of the choice of food consumption, where each act can be planned in view of the impact it will cause, and, on the other hand, these choices are part of a larger narrative - which, despite not being religious in the present research - is all-encompassing in the sense that it guides daily behavior and gives meaning to life. Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood [2006] present categories that can also be used to think about food consumption in the context of Brazil: hedonistic, in the sense of the appreciation and status of meat consumption; moralistic, in the sense that this consumption is also involved with morals and conscience regarding the environment; and naturalistic, in the sense that this consumption also satisfies the desire to consume meat which part of the population was deprived of in the past.

In a country where meat consumption and production occupy prestigious places, research and statistics about the vegetarian community are still scarce and highly contestable. According to IBOPE, 14% of the Brazilian population declared themselves vegetarian in 2018, which is estimated to reach 30 million Brazilians. The survey further states that in the metropolitan regions of São Paulo, Curitiba, Recife, and Rio de Janeiro this percentage rose to 16%. This statistic shows a 75% growth in relation to 2012, when the same survey indicated that the proportion of the Brazilian population in metropolitan regions who declared themselves vegetarian was 8%. Another 2017 Datafolha survey also indicated that 63% of Brazilians would like to reduce their meat consumption.

However, in an unequal context such as Brazil, it is necessary to interpret this data critically. Another report from the same year that investigated the effect of the pandemic on Brazilians' food consumption [Galindo et al., 2021] shows that 44% of respondents reported a reduction in meat consumption. The researchers contextualize these data in a country where 59.4% of the surveyed families are food insecure [31.7% mild, 12.7% moderate, and 15% severe] during the pandemic. The lower the per capita income of the household, the greater the food insecurity: among those with per capita income per household of up to R\$ 500, 71.4% were in a situation of food insecurity; among those with income from R\$ 501 to R\$ 1000, 43.9% were in this situation; and among those with income above R\$ 1000, 26.5% were in the same situation. In this sense, it is important to reflect on the data that

shows the reduction in meat consumption: does this reduction mean that more people are choosing to reduce their consumption, or does it mean that people can no longer afford to eat meat [even though they would like]?

The present discussion recognizes that there are many different factors and motivations behind the reduction of meat consumption. However, I focus on understanding the narratives through which subjects choose and construct their transition to a meatless diet and how this is understood and questioned by their networks of sociability, with a focus on family. It is important to emphasize that the subjects I interviewed made the choice to stop eating meat, that is, the motivator for adopting this type of diet was not lack of purchasing power or difficulty of access [Hase-Ueta et al., 2023]. The focus of the present research is the intentionality and agency present in choosing not to consume meat. The subjects that do not consume meat due to lack of access, the “involuntary vegetarians” [Harris, 1998], were not considered in this discussion.



Picture of a salad retrieved from Unsplash. Nadine Primeau





# 3 | Data collection

Picture of meat retrieved from Unsplash, Kirsty TG.

Following the intergenerational knot as a methodology to research the different food narratives that get entangled when they meet, I chose to focus on vegetarian and vegan youth selected in a sample of university students who negotiated their values and food choices with their families of meat eaters. In their testimonies, they shared their family memories, their process of stopping meat consumption, and the conflicts that emerged from this decision. Through their narratives of conflict, it was possible to identify the different meanings attributed to meat from different generations.

## 3.1. Interviews

I applied qualitative methodology through semi-structured in-depth interviews, as the goal was to understand the processes and meanings attributed by individuals to social situations, and not necessarily to make generalizations (Hesse-Biber, 2011). In-depth interviews seek to understand the subjects' lived experience because according to Hesse-Biber (2011):

We are interested in getting at the “subjective” understanding an individual brings to a given situation or set of circumstances. In-depth interviews are issue-oriented. In other words, a researcher might use this method to explore a particular topic and gain focused information on the issue from the respondents (Hesse-Biber, 2011, p. 118).

The interviews lasted between one and two and a half hours on average. Although the respondents were aware of their food practices and experiences, they had often never been asked about their relationship with their family around food issues and needed time to remember and formulate the feelings and emotions involved in these relationships, which often featured conflict.

This methodology also benefited from the grounded theory approach, as it does not presuppose a priori categories, and the focus is on listening to the field. In this respect, the goal was to understand how the subjects understood their biographies, and food narratives within the broader context of socio-economic transformations in the country and the emergence of environmental issues in the debate on food.





In Brazil, my research was conducted between April and July 2019 and based at the University of Campinas [UNICAMP] in the State of São Paulo. I interviewed 23 students, who were undergraduate and graduate students, who had reduced their meat consumption and I asked how the decision to stop eating meat was understood and discussed in their families, with special attention to the conversations and conflicts they had with the two older generations [parents and grandparents].

The first step to start recruiting the interviewees was to send a message to the university's Facebook group. I acknowledge that there is a bias when recruiting interviewees online, but during this time, Facebook was a platform that was very active in spreading messages across different institutes and departments in the university, and the students also had access to public computers and the internet on the campus. The message was posted on April 2nd, 2019, and within 3 days, it had 145 interactions with 259 messages from people interested in participating. Among these, I started selecting students, aiming to have a sample from different parts of the country, of different genders, and from different courses within the university. For safety reasons, all the interviews were carried out inside the campus, in a room that the library of the Institute of Philosophy and Human Sciences kindly made available for this purpose during the months of research. Table 1 shows the list of interviewees, their gender, age, major, education level and the region of the country they were originally from.

Picture of meat retrieved from Unsplash. José Ignacio Pompé.



**Table 1**  
**University students interviewed**

	<b>Name*</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Major</b>	<b>Level</b>	<b>Region</b>
1.	João	Male	21	Mathematics	undergrad	Southeast
2.	Antonio	Male	24	Mathematics	graduate	Southeast
3.	Regina	Female	22	Pedagogy	undergrad	Southeast
4.	Teresa	Female	24	Social Sciences	graduate	Southeast
5.	Henrique	Male	21	Mathematics	undergrad	Southeast
6.	Julio	Male	23	Engineering	undergrad	Centerwest
7.	Hélio	Male	24	Biology	undergrad	Southeast
8.	Afonso	Male	21	Statistics	undergrad	Southeast
9.	Marcelo	Male	20	Engineering	undergrad	Southeast
10.	Mario	Male	23	Linguistic	undergrad	Southeast
11.	Maria	Female	20	Geography	undergrad	Southeast
12.	Marta	Female	25	Chemistry	graduate	Northeast
13.	Alice	Female	29	N/A	N/A	Northeast
14.	Monica	Female	21	Biology	undergrad	Northeast
15.	Valéria	Female	24	Biology	graduate	Southeast
16.	Mirela	Female	19	Mathematics	undergrad	Northwest
17.	Antonio	Male	31	Engineering	graduate	Northwest

**Table 1**  
**University students interviewed**

	<b>Name*</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Major</b>	<b>Level</b>	<b>Region</b>
18.	Regina	Female	19	Geography	undergrad	Southeast
19.	Teresa	Female	19	Geography	graduate	Southeast
20.	Henrique	Female	21	Biology	undergrad	South
21.	Julio	Female	19	Social Sciences	undergrad	Northeast
22.	Hélio	Female	23	Pharmacy	undergrad	Southeast
23.	Afonso	Female	24	Economy	graduate	Northeast

*I followed the saturation point methodology, which means that I stopped recruiting interviewees as soon as the interviews started to repeat themselves regarding the points of discussion..*

## ◆ 3.2. Data analysis

Following the principles of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1994), the categories for data analysis emerged from the data collection. This means that during the interviews, I presented a theme (like family) and let the interviewees define what/who they considered as belonging to their families and which memories they considered valuable to the discussion on food.

Thematic qualitative text analysis was adopted, that is, the categorization process was being built throughout the stages of the process (Kuckartz, 2014). The thematic analysis allowed us to identify relevant categories in the speeches of Brazilian students, and thus understand the main issues in common that are present in their experiences. The thematic analysis focuses on identifying, systematizing, and analyzing topics and subtopics and how they are related (Kuckartz, 2014). The main categories considered in this discussion are regarding the meanings attributed to meat by the different generations. I identified five main categories: 1) Health; 2) Tradition/Culture; 3) Caring/Emotion; 4) Sociability/Community; and 5) Historical memory/ Taste of prosperity. These themes emerged from the interviews and were used by the interviewees to organize their meat narratives around the intergenerational conflict.

# 4 | Results and discussion: Meat narratives

Picture of meat retrieved from Unsplash, Myles Tan.

The results of the interviews were intertwined into “meat narratives”, which show how the intergenerational knot tensioned the different values regarding food consumption. It is important to understand these findings in the light of the discussion on inequalities and I emphasize two main ways it affects meat consumption in this context. Firstly, in the Brazilian context of inequality, meat consumption acquired a status of aspirational consumption (to those who could not afford it) and, in this sense, embodied the symbol of a socially valued luxury food item. Secondly, the interviewees reported experiences of social mobility through the generations, and in this way, meat consumption became one of the means through which these families understood their lives getting better.

In the face of climate change, understanding the dialogue between different generations is a way of responding to the temporality challenges of social change. Understanding how meat consumption is discussed among these families can contribute to the construction of inclusive food futures in the context of the Anthropocene.

## 4.1. Family experience in relation to the university students’ diet change

Harris [1998] points out that among the different food practices, meat consumption and its sharing are central to the establishment of sociability networks and in the ritualization that generates closeness. Roth [2005] presents food as an arena for negotiating power and also for reproducing traditions and hierarchies. In this context, food diet changes within the family can cause disordered relationships. The family stands out as the sphere of greatest conflict between young vegetarians and the older generations, where these new values and new practices defy the traditional hierarchy of the family where the elders would have more power. Food is also understood as a vehicle for the transmission of family culture between generations, and the change in the eating patterns of these young people means a rupture of food traditions and also shakes the emotional relationships established through food. “Vegetarianism manifests as an explicit ideology, subverting the values and beliefs expressed via the dominant meat-eating culture’s implicit ideology, and this is crucial to understanding these intrafamilial conflicts” (Roth, 2005, p. 197).

Sociability was pointed out as the biggest challenge to becoming a vegetarian in Brazil. The students had to face resistance from the side of their friends and family. Their motivations for becoming vegetarian were diverse and combined, including animal welfare, environmental issues, and health. But the university students’ sociability networks were mostly composed of non-vegetarians, and especially du-

ring their transition to a vegetarian diet, they had to answer many questions and critiques against their decision, and put up with “jokes” (for example associating the non-consumption of meat to lack of masculinity). They said that their food consumption was often pointed to as an “impracticality” because it made it more difficult to eat together (in the case of the family, it was in the sense of food preparation, and in the context of friends it was related to finding a restaurant to eat together that could have vegetarian/vegan options).

The families’ reception to this food transition of the students can be divided into three moments: the immediate reaction when the students told the family about the diet change, the reaction over time, and the possibility of the family becoming vegetarian. The immediate reactions are divided between those who supported the decision, those who were indifferent to the situation, and those who had a negative reaction. Most of the students’ families reacted negatively at first. The most immediate focus of concern and resistance was health.

In a second moment, most families showed some kind of acceptance of this decision. Some parents have accepted the change of diet, but are not yet supportive. Others accepted and also made an effort to be inclusive within their households. However, most families continued to consume meat. The interviews captured a specific moment in time of these families’ discussions, and the students said that this was in no way a closed argument. In this sense, the opening to a continuing conversation between the changing values can show that the “knot” can lead to social change.

## ◆ 4.2. Meanings of meat consumption

The older generation’s unwillingness to change, as reported by the students’ testimonies, led me to investigate which meanings of meat were mobilised in these discussions. These students who have given up eating meat were mostly motivated by animal welfare, followed by environmental concerns and health. When asked the reasons why for their parents and grandparents meat consumption was still important, the main categories that emerged were: Health, Tradition, Sociability (ties to community and family), Affection, Prosperity (Better life).

Health was the most immediate response among respondents in Brazil, especially in relation to their grandparents. The families’ concern was that vegetarian food did not have enough protein for a healthy diet and they feared that young people would develop nutritional deficiencies.

The culinary tradition was also pointed out as an important matter. Lidia, a student who comes from the South of Brazil, a place where meat consumption plays a central role, raised an issue that was recurrent in many of the interviews, according to her family “meat means culture”. In other words, the Brazilian culinary tradition had animal products in most of its traditional dishes and cooking and eating them would be a way to celebrate the Brazilian culture and reinforce the Brazilian identity. Her family has the habit of eating meat together every week, and this ritual also brings the affective dimension of food.

Another issue that was present in most of the interviews was the emotional dimension of food, many of the students reported that learning to cook and eating their family's traditional dishes (which often contained animal products) was a way to show affection and to belong to the family. The affective issue was also present in Teresa's interview, who said that the meat dishes remind her family of traditional dishes that are passed down from generation to generation.

In Brazil, the consumption of meat - especially the churrasco (barbecue) - was also pointed out as an important ritual where not only family and community were brought together, but also a vehicle to show that the family was doing well. According to Marta, for her family, meat tastes like happiness, because it is the opportunity to gather the family for a barbecue and enjoy the day together.

Although not the first to be reported by the students, the narrative that was given the most importance by them was meat consumption as a sign of intergenerational social mobility. Meat was a scarce product for their grandparents' generation in Brazil. This made the product the target of aspirational consumption, and consequently, the fulfillment of this desire was a sign that "life was getting better".

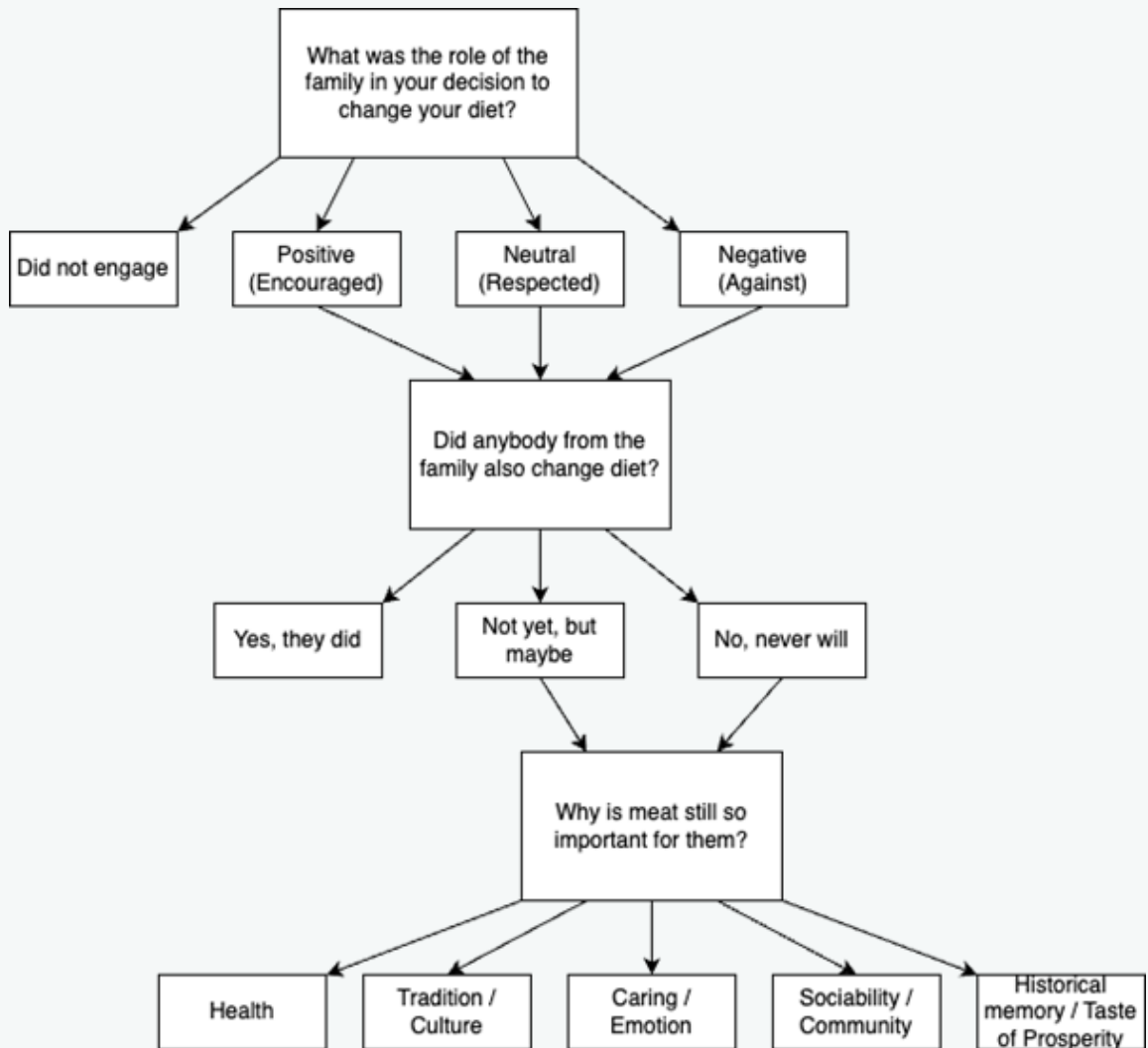
In Brazil, memories of scarcity also influenced the ways in which older generations communicated what "good food" is. According to student Claudia, her family considered meat the most delicious part of the meal, and if the meal didn't have meat it couldn't be considered a "real meal", in contrast to her childhood experience when they couldn't afford to buy meat. The experience of another student Eduardo, who was from the Midwest part of the country, represented many of the Brazilian students' narratives: he said that his parents considered meat, and more specifically the celebration of the churrasco (barbecue), as the most important way to bring friends and family together, and that they often celebrated birthday parties and special occasions in this way. In these situations, they not only shared a meal together, but could also show how "well-off" (their life had improved) they were by choosing the most expensive cuts of meat to offer their guests. Maria said that the issue of economic mobility is the main marker in relation to meat consumption. According to her, meat symbolized abundance in her family, that is, the power to buy and show that the family is doing well. She says that meat consumption is a sign that they "have a full table" and can enjoy a full meal. Valeria also said that her grandparents came from humble backgrounds and eating meat was considered a luxury, so the family being able to eat meat now was seen as a great achievement, in other words, it is the taste that life was getting better, it was something they had been longing for a long time.

The paths of the interviews and the results can be summarized in the following image. The image shows the main structure of the discussion, where the meat narratives emerged. It goes from the initial reaction triggered by the student's decision to stop eating meat, to the discussion about changing food consumption in the family. Finally, it shows the willingness of all the members of the family to discuss the meanings and importance of meat, and the ways that change is perceived in this context.



**Figure 1**

**Paths of the interviews**



*[Image created by the author and presented at "Researching Food Movements" course at the Freie Universität Berlin by Professor Renata Motta in 2020].*

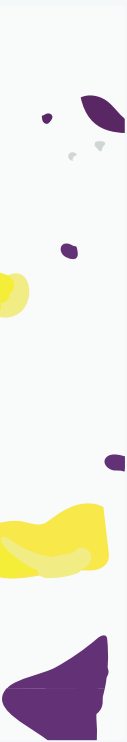
## Conclusion: avoiding the Goudian Knot

The Anthropocene poses challenges to be faced by different generations at the same time. The temporality of climate emergency demands new methodological frames and opens new opportunities to understanding the ever-changing social reality. The present discussion shows that the encounter between different generations can shed new light into the changing social values as well as the strategies of communicating and negotiating them. Even though older generations were generally unwilling to change their food consumption choices, and often considered vegetarianism a “young person’s thing,” students perceived it as a priority to involve their parents’ and grandparents’ generations in the process towards dietary change. However, regardless of what each generation chooses to eat, what was considered important was their agency as consumers, or in other words, their power to choose what to eat, as reported by the students.

This question resonates with Ortner’s [2007] discussion, in which the author argues that agency cannot be interpreted as a stand-alone, individual issue, but within the multiplicity of social relations and inequalities to which they are tied. According to the author, the question of agency has two fields of meaning: 1) agency in relation to intentionality and the possibility of pursuing culturally defined projects; 2) agency in relation to power, “with the fact of acting in the context of relations of inequality, asymmetry, and social forces” [Ortner, 2007, p. 58]. In the present research, the agency could be observed through the intentionality and power of making the food consumption decision.

When discussing food consumption in the context of climate emergency, it is imperative to bring the scholarship on food justice. The debates on inequality bring an important understanding of food consumption and place them in their contexts, which is crucial in building better strategies in communicating and addressing its needs. Meat consumption is entangled in their lives and tells the stories of deprivation, class mobility, and ultimately the emergence of new values in the context of the Anthropocene. The present discussion showed how meat narratives were constructed by intertwining different narrative threads of the different generations, and what can be seen as a knot, can be a generative moment of social change.





In negotiating food consumption with their family, students confirmed what Guthman (2008) described about information not being the only driver of awareness and consequently behavior change. These students, well equipped with information and combative language, recognized that in addition to the information they bring to their family, other factors exert greater influence, such as their experiences of food deprivation and their views of what a “better life” consists of. In the experience of the encounter between contrasting worldviews and the resistance of breaking the connection (because they are part of the family), the subjects of different generations are faced with the challenge of recognizing themselves in their values, privileges, and intersectionalities.


In order to build an inclusive approach to food consumption change, it is crucial to acknowledge that different generations built their food narratives according to their own historical experience, and in this sense, there are no fixed “right” or “wrong”. One of the biggest challenges that sustainable diets pose for the future is engaging different generations and the coexistence of different historical food narratives at the same table. The young students interviewed showed respect towards their older family members and were able to put their own values in perspective and not universalize them. They had as a priority to keep the ties with their families, even if it involved constant discussion: these families learned to live with the knot, where different generational narratives coexist, and where social change is possible.

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