

Briefing Note

Subsistence: A Critical Overview of the Concept

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subsistence (n.)

early 15c., “existence, independence,” from Late Latin subsistentia “substance, reality,” in Medieval Latin also “stability,” from Latin subsistens, present participle of subsistere “stand still or firm” (see subsist). Latin subsistentia is a loan translation of Greek hypostasis “foundation, substance, real nature, subject matter; that which settles at the bottom, sediment,” literally “anything set under.” (Etymonline, 2017)

Arctic and subarctic Indigenous populations have always subsisted on what the land has to offer and have passed on their knowledge to newcomers. At the same time subsistence, or living off the land, is a way of life not only for Indigenous populations of the North, but for many of the diverse residents that inhabit the Arctic and Subarctic today. As with many other terms, subsistence originated in Greek, was translated to Latin, exported to many other areas of the world and debated over hundreds of years by Christian theologists (Thieme, 2010) - before developing an economic connotation in the 19th and 20th century (Moss, 2010). Subsistence as a term has since been instrumentalized to classify forms of living along hierarchical orders. Why different terms are used is dependent on their particular setting. What they designate might be very different depending on who is using them and to what avail. Having a closer look at legal, political and everyday terminology helps us understand the webs of relations within which they operate.

Several biases are associated with the term subsistence: A gender bias arises from the term’s connotations with unpaid women’s care work, a spatial bias from association with the rural nature of poor (often African or Asian) farmers (von Werlhof, Bennholdt-Thomsen & Faraclas, 2001), and an ethnic bias from the association with foraging lifestyles of Indigenous peoples perceived to live in remote areas (Gartler, 2013). Thus, subsistence can be seen as a term for the *economy of the others* (Gartler, 2018). They are biases because they are essentially not correct: un-paid provisioning activities exist in all areas of the world and across all sectors of the population. Within (neo-liberal) capitalist value frameworks un-paid activities have, however, been systematically devalued in favor of monetized economic sectors and wage work.

In English-language use this becomes especially apparent when subsistence is connected to notions of poverty and deprivation, which is what I refer to as the economicistic bias. This devaluation is linked to the devaluation of any non-monetary sectors that continue to exist outside or marginal to the money economy. Kuokkanen puts it this way: “For many, the term ‘subsistence’ carries negative connotations of primitive ways of life, a low standard of living, or ‘eking out’ a wretched existence in conditions of poverty. For others it refers to ‘primitive’ societies of the past or rural communities in the global South in need of so-called development” (Kuokkanen, 2011). Reimer (2006) argues, moreover, that characterizing the subsistence economy as informal, or somehow unorganized and irregular perpetuates the stigmatization of people’s whose ways of life do not conform to idealized standards of economy.

While in Alaska collectives and individuals must identify their practices as subsistence in order to be able to navigate land use disputes (Moss, 2010), in other regions across the Arctic and Subarctic other terms are common such as simply hunting, gathering, fishing, trapping, and whaling. In northwestern Canada, where the term subsistence is not embedded in the same ways as in Alaska in legal frameworks governing life, ‘living off the land’ is frequently used. Indigenous peoples in Alaska both appropriate and critique ‘subsistence’ as a way of designating their way of life.

The profound gulf between an Alaska Native definition of subsistence and mainstream definitions is pointed out by Indigenous leaders and activists. This statement by Iñupiaq leader Eileen MacLean makes it abundantly clear: “Subsistence is not about poverty; it is about wealth. This wealth is expressed in the harvest and in the sharing and celebration that result from the harvest” (MacLean, 1998). Yup’ik broadcaster and journalist John Active confirms what is at stake: “Our subsistence lifestyle is our culture. Without subsistence we will not survive as a people. If our culture, our subsistence lifestyle should disappear, we will be no more” (Active 1998). These quotes show the profound difference between static, purely material and ahistorical understandings as the lowest level of economic provision (or ‘mere survival’) to what Alaska Natives frame as their way of life. Understanding subsistence as a whole way of life constitutes a dynamic, broad, and inclusive understanding of the term, including material as well as immaterial and symbolic dimensions. It is also a contextual, long-term, and transgenerational understanding.

Table 1 describes different dimensions of meaning associated with the term and their associated poles:

Dimensions of Meaning	Poles	
Variability	Static	Dynamic
Categories of Exclusion and Inclusion	Restrictive	Broad
Disciplinarity	Minimalistic/Fragmented	Holistic
Im-/Materiality	Material	Immaterial/Symbolic
Situativity	A-historic Short-Term Tempo-centric	Contextual Long-Term Transgenerational

Table 1: Dimensions of Meaning of Subsistence (Gartler, 2018:51)

A subsistence way of life encompasses not just foraging, it is a much broader, holistic concept for Alaskan Indigenous peoples, as this quote by Jonathan Solomon in Fort Yukon reflects:

I never heard the word subsistence until 1971 under the Native land claims act. Before that time, when I was brought up in the culture of my people, it's always been "our culture" and "our land." You cannot break out subsistence or the meaning of subsistence or try to identify it, and you can't break it out of the culture. The culture and the life of my Native people are the subsistence way of life. And that's what we always used, the subsistence way of life. It goes hand in hand with our own culture, our own language, and all our activities (Solomon in Berger, 1985).

Alaska Native ways of framing subsistence expand the notion to include animals and the immaterial world (Newton, 1983). "Whereas the connection to 'existence' is similar to the way subsistence was understood by early European philosophers and theologists, provision here is no longer solely by and for humans" (Gartler, 2018: 57). Instead, agency is extended to animals and other non-human persons in Indigenous ontologies. For example, among Yukon First Nations "singing to animals is not an uncommon occurrence. Songs are sung to draw in animals, to evoke their presence, to thank them" (Ranspot, 2019). Animals, rivers, glaciers, plants and lakes are seen as sentient beings who interact from 'day one' with humans to ensure the mutual and peaceful subsistence or co-existence of humans and their surroundings (Cruikshank, 2005).

During a meeting with Indigenous Elders in Juneau the following statement was made:

As Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian people, we are taught to have respect for our food; for the animals and plants that constitute our food; and for the teachings of our Elders with regard to the gathering, preparing, sharing and eating of our food. Our respect for our food is evidenced in the beautiful totem stakes that our Tlingit ancestors placed in streams to greet the salmon as they returned to their birth places; in our intricately carved feast dishes; in the stories we teach our young about the relationship between the Tlingit, the Haida, and the Tsimshian and the animals that are our sustainers of life; and in our songs and dances, as is evidenced when our beloved berries are brought in at a *koo.eex'* (memorial party) (Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian Elders in Newton & Moss, 2005).

At the same occasion in Juneau, it was made clear that a reductionist and purely regulatory understanding of subsistence is inept: "Each Elder at that first meeting and at successive meetings, passionately objected to having their understanding of Tlingit food reduced to a regulatory word like "subsistence" (Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian Elders in Newton & Moss, 2005).

Not only the term, but also the activities and life ways denoted become increasingly politicized acts in parts of the Arctic and subarctic. Why is the term subsistence so contentious and why are being on the land, foraging and other activities aimed at providing for oneself and one's community being considered as acts of resistance on Turtle Island and elsewhere? Underlying these issues is a continuing struggle for (land-)rights and (Indigenous, and non-Indigenous) self-determination, necessary under conditions of (neo-colonial) systems of extractivism and appropriation of land – whether in Arctic, European, rural or urban settings.

In many polar regions, the extractive industry and accompanying colonizing processes have contributed to the marginalization of subsistence life ways and endangered food – and, more broadly, human security. However, it is necessary to consider the differential effects of the wage economy including the extractive industry. High wages, and several days or weeks between shifts, within the mining industry for example, can provide opportunities for individuals to receive a higher-than-usual -income (Saxinger & Gartler, 2017), distribute wealth – notably the case when the worker has children (Gibson & Klinck, 2005), and facilitate on-the-land activities by making it possible to buy (better) hunting equipment. At the same time, highly formalized wage employment can take away necessary time for hunting trips (Nelson, Natcher & Hickey, 2005).

In the North, the interwoven realms of monetary and non-monetary provision including government subsidies are often called a ‘mixed economy’ with a focus on sharing within subsistence (see e.g. Burnsilver, 2016; Ready & Power, 2018; Wheeler & Thornton, 2005). However, structures of inequalities, which significantly shape this relationship, are not always highlighted. This overview of the concept of subsistence confirms the “great deal of social evolutionary baggage” (Moss, 2010: 123) and biases it carries by highlighting Indigenous viewpoints and critique. To conclude, subsistence can denote a wide variety of activities, however it always refers to unpaid activities – which are still valued less compared to paid ones, by discursive connotation with female, rural and Indigenous labour and carework, as well as poverty.

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