

Conclusion

Food is an encounter with the world . . . the entire world

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As we have seen, food is a formidable part of the relationships and interactions within the living world, as well as a very particular vector of political commitment: food affects everyone in their daily lives and is relevant to many fields, whether relating to the environment, health, education, solidarity, pleasure, or personal and cultural identities. Food is also connected to the large number of economic activities on which it depends. It is not a closed field operating in a vacuum. It is shaped by external factors and, in turn, shapes the world in which we live. Rather than defending a specific status for food, the ‘ecology of food’ – given the diverse range of relationships it encompasses – proposes to use it as an entry point to rethink our world. This is a world in crisis, a world crying out to invent and experiment with other relationships. Food, a ‘total human fact’, can provide the ground for this new human adventure. Let us imagine, then, an adventure we can call a ‘world banquet’, a tale to rekindle our enthusiasm in these troubled times.

The world on our plates . . .

Under the cool shade of tall trees on this hot summer morning, about thirty people are busy setting up large round tables and chairs, spreading tablecloths, and placing cutlery, food and flowers on the tables. A real ballet plays out between a large old building and the immense area under the canopy, where nearly two hundred guests have been invited to feast. The plates, all identical, were made specially for the occasion. They feature the patterns that male puffer fish draw on the sand of the sea floor in Japan to seduce their females – a sort of sculpted,

perfectly geometrical mandala, proving that art is not the preserve of humans. This art reveals a 'relational aesthetic,' to quote the curator and art historian Nicolas Bourriaud, for whom 'art is a state of encounter'.¹ On the glasses, also sculpted for the occasion, are drawings taken from Neolithic pottery – for human art may well have begun with the decoration of household utensils. The tables are set, and a light breeze has risen.

The large building is as busy as an anthill. Sacks of onions, rice, potatoes, yams and cassava roots are piled up. There are bottles of various oils, tomatoes, eggs, fish and shellfish on ice. Men and women of all origins are cooking on dozens of stoves. At large tables, we peel, we cut, we pour, we stir, we taste, all in an incredible blend of fragrances. Virtually all the languages of the world can be heard here: there are at least 100 different nationalities from all continents, each with its own people and landscapes. Groups have been formed: about thirty people are each cooking a dish from their own country with the help of other participants from other countries. The next day, other groups will be cooking other dishes. A decision had to be made on the basic ingredients that would be shared by all the cuisines. They were bought from farmers who came to deliver them in person, curious as they were to see this gathering so widely covered in the media. Each cook has also brought from home ingredients specific to their cuisine: seeds, nuts, spices, fruits, vegetables and so on. An Indonesian man gives a taste of galanga, a Senegalese woman lets others smell the yet, a Burkinabé man the soumbala, an Amazonian woman the cupuacu and a Greek man his oregano, while a Mexican woman compares chilli peppers.

The air is filled with laughter and expressions of curiosity and pleasure. Amazement lights up faces. Everyone has also brought kitchen utensils – knives, large spoons, sieves, graters, chopsticks, pestles and similar cooking tools. Everyone has their own habits and dietary beliefs. A Japanese man explains how his gastronomy, which is tied to the seasons and natural tastes, sparks emotions linked to representations of nature. There is also a West African Peul woman who states that what makes one 'human' is not the act of eating in itself (cattle eat as well) but that of sharing, which allows us to build ties with others, with nature and with the spirits. These same spirits, adds a Korean woman, guide the seemingly magical and uncontrolled processes of fermentation in the preparation of kimchi (fermented cabbage). Evidently, all these food identities hybridize and recombine as they come into contact with one another. Discussing

¹ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Esthétique relationnelle*, Éditions Les presses du réel, 1998.

ancient African beliefs, the historian and philosopher Achille Mbembe inspires our guests:

There was no identity except in a fragmented, scattered and shattered form. Besides, what mattered was not the self as such, but the way in which it was composed and recomposed, each time in relation to other living entities. In other words, there was no identity but in the becoming, in the web of relationships of which each was the living sum. Identity, in this sense [. . .], was what was entrusted to the care of others, in the experience of the encounter and the relationship, which always involved trial and error, movement and, above all, the unexpected, the surprise that one had to learn to welcome. For in the unexpected and the surprise lay the event.²

Our event is, indeed, the culmination of a process that began over two years ago. It came on the heels of the repeated crises that the planet has experienced since 2020. Various health crises have affected humans, animals and plants. Extreme weather events have become more frequent and severe. The collapse of biodiversity and the depletion of soil and water resources have led to a dramatic drop in agricultural yields. Mass migrations caused by these crises have created great social tensions. In 2040, after months of negotiations and under pressure from hundreds of increasingly powerful citizen movements, governments came – with great difficulty – to an agreement to launch a participatory, grass-roots reconstruction process to transform food systems. Hundreds of collectives were formed around the world to imagine tomorrow's often dreamt of and desired food system.

Thousands of citizens, whether volunteers or randomly selected representatives, together with professionals, experts and locally elected government officials, were involved in building new food systems. The hundreds of proposals developed by these collectives were compiled, analysed and synthesized. The result, beyond specificities, differences and even contradictions, was a broad consensus to invent sustainable food systems guided by a very different direction to the one which many countries had followed until then. This path steered clear of the biotechnological rush proposed by some in the 2020s to embrace industrial food production based on seaweed, bacteria or fungi in order to abandon an agriculture that was deemed predatory and mortiferous. The consensus, on the contrary, was to invent an agroecology based on negotiating the relationships between all living beings, both human and non-human.

² Excerpt from the column 'Les métaphysiques africaines permettent de penser l'identité en mouvement', published in the newspaper *Le Monde* on 15 December 2019.

The political movement thus formed by these thousands of contributors then went on to draw up a 'Universal Declaration of the Rights of the Living' – emphasizing no longer just humans but all living beings, both human and non-human.

Two bodies were then created. One was comprised of representatives randomly selected from among the thousands of contributors to the respective food projects of specific territories. The other was made up of representatives of animals, forests, waterways, plants and other aspects of nature, who, to become these beings' spokespersons, studied them and endeavoured to communicate with them – with some surprising successes – proving that it was right and just to recognize non-human Earthlings as 'intelligent' beings. Above all, they sought to implement an 'ecology of the sentient', dear to the ecologist Jacques Tassin, for whom 'the sentient escapes theorization; it is a reserve of the invisible where fundamental links are forged in the interweaving through which every living being moves: the sentient connects us to each other. [. . .] not to speak of harmony with Nature but rather to seek to regain a place within this living matrix'.³

These representatives decided to redesign the world, starting with the one thing that everyone, without exception, does every day: eat, and in order to do so, gather and produce, process, cook and serve food. The way we eat (and organize ourselves to do so) defines the world in which we live. Hence the starting point: What do we want to eat tomorrow? How do we want this food to be produced? What consequences and uncertainties are acceptable to us and our descendants? For this was not about reverting to ancient ways or freezing ourselves in the present time but about collectively defining which changes we wished to undertake in order not to jeopardize future generations.

Gathered in one village, these representatives have now come from all four corners of the earth for a few weeks to cook and eat together and to discuss the 'Universal Declaration'. As the many dishes are brought to the table, the guests take their seats. In the distance, two magpies perched in a tree enjoy the show and comment on the guests' colourful outfits. The day before, one of the participants cooked a dish to which she added a magical ingredient that gives those who eat it the gift of Tita, a character from the novel and film *Como agua para chocolate* – namely the gift of being able to experience through the food one eats the feelings of the person who cooked it. As a result, when the guests start to eat, they suddenly feel overcome with friendliness, benevolence, generosity and

³ Jacques Tassin, *Pour une écologie du sensible*, Éditions Odile Jacob, 2020.

humour, brimming with laughter, sensual love and poetry. Such were the feelings that prevailed during the preparation of the meal. As the musicians start to play, some participants get up to dance, cheered on by the others. The trees rustle with pleasure, and the birds accompany the music with their songs.

. . . with everyone

Back to reality, in 2020, the Occitanie Region in France organized a citizens' convention to come up with proposals to improve individual and collective well-being, reduce social and territorial divides and restore trust in society and its institutions. One hundred randomly selected citizens discussed their concerns, and it soon became apparent that the issue of food, although not initially mentioned, was taking up a large part of the discussions. Food, which is part of everyone's daily reality several times a day, was increasingly at the centre of questions surrounding health and environmental risks and of the watchwords conveyed in the media. Although all the participants felt both concerned and qualified to talk about food based on their daily practices, they also admitted to being somewhat lost in the maze of discourses and contradictory information. Who should they believe today? How could something as simple as eating have become so complicated? Many of the proposals discussed during this democratic exercise thus implicitly related to food.

This experience taught us two important lessons. The first is that food is a galvanizing topic for rethinking society. Of course, this is undoubtedly particularly true in France, a country so enamoured with the topic of food. But the fact that, in daily life, everyone applies their own set of principles to try to eat well is far more galvanizing for citizens than a more theoretical reflection on the management of natural resources, for example. Food therefore constitutes a good starting point to rethink our relationships with ourselves, with others and with the environment.

The second lesson, as the actual substance of the discussions revealed time and again, is that there is a gap between two completely separate worlds. On the one hand, we have the scholarly discourses of experts warning of risks, activists proposing new standards of conduct and affluent consumers with sufficient financial and cognitive resources to experiment with new food practices. On the other hand, we have the vast majority of the population with limited means – those with little money, space or time to spare to invest in a more sustainable food supply and for whom 'committed' discourse can come across as out of touch with

their daily realities. These are precisely the people one meets during these citizens' conventions. Some of them are no longer represented in opinion polls, which are increasingly conducted online and involve long questionnaires. This segment of the population is partly unaccounted for due to its precarious situation, being unable or unwilling to seek emergency food aid. These citizens are growing increasingly resentful of certain stigmatizing discourses, and they are frustrated with not being able to implement dietary and environmental recommendations for lack of resources. Some may even challenge the new standards proposed as a way of turning a blind eye to the gap between what they should do and what they can actually do. This 'Parliament of the Invisible', as historian and sociologist Pierre Rosanvallon put it, feels misunderstood, forgotten and not taken into account.⁴ Hence the crucial importance, in the transformation of food systems, of creating inclusive spaces for dialogue and developing proposals that take into account multiple social, generational and cultural realities.

This is the direction that the UNESCO Chair in World Food Systems wishes to pursue in the years to come, approaching food as a formidable daily opportunity to awaken to the diversity and beauty of the world and to eat it . . . with everyone.

⁴ Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le Parlement des invisibles*, Seuil, 2014.