

Introduction

Food and all its dimensions

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This book marks (and celebrates) the first chapter of activity for the UNESCO Chair in World Food Systems, created in 2011 by Professor Jean-Louis Rastoin (L'Institut Agro Montpellier), together with a multidisciplinary group of teachers and researchers from different institutions¹ at the Agropolis Campus in Montpellier, France. In this sense, this book is an important step: writing it helped us reflect on our own work, taking stock of the ground we had already covered and thinking about our future commitments.

Since its creation, the UNESCO Chair in World Food Systems has dedicated itself to decompartmentalizing knowledge on food systems and to supporting the different actors driving change to promote sustainable food systems. The Chair fulfils its mandate of bringing science and society together through training, action research and knowledge dissemination activities, with a view to addressing all the dimensions of food systems (environmental, socio-cultural, health, economic, political etc.).

A unique approach

Over the years, and aided by external evaluations of its work, the Chair has arrived at a number of clearly identified pillars, including the following:

- Developing an approach focused on fieldwork and its challenges by building bridges between researchers, stakeholders and citizens through the creation of tools and spaces for reflection and discussion, including publications, talks, engagement with the media, participation in networks of committed actors, meetings with local authorities, participation in expert commissions and so

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on. In this respect, the Chair plays a political role (in the sense of involvement in the affairs of the polity) which it intends to continue developing in the years to come.

- Disseminating knowledge by articulating different perspectives and points of view and by drawing on different types of knowledge from academia (across different disciplines) and the professional world, as well as from artistic fields for a sensitive approach.
- Adopting a broad definition of food systems, spanning the full range of activities and actors involved in food production, processing, distribution, consumption and waste management as well as the institutions that support and regulate them, striving not for the advent of a sustainable food system but rather for a sustainable articulation of different food systems.
- Adopting an international perspective to be able to approach situations in their context, with a particular focus on bridging the ‘North/South divide’.
- Finally, considering all the dimensions of food systems – health, social, environmental, cultural, economic or hedonic dimensions – and giving them all equal importance.

This book reflects the unique approach that the Chair has followed over the past years. It is intended as a source of inspiration for agents of change and strives to articulate different perspectives on food and the associated contemporary issues. As they have developed, food systems – most often described as ‘industrialized’ – raise a number of global challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, soil depletion and health crises, the effects of which are felt throughout our societies. These challenges call for the transformation of food systems.

To therefore take all aspects of food systems into account in its reflection on this transformation, the book weaves an ‘ecology of food’ so as to better address the sustainability issues surrounding food systems. The analogy we draw between food and ecology is rooted in the double meaning of ecology, as a science of relationships (between the different elements of the biosphere) and as a political commitment (political ecology). We consider food as a vehicle for both relationships and societal engagement: this is the core premise of our work.

On the menu

Food is a ‘total social fact’: as previously mentioned, it is essential (not to say fundamental, which could be interpreted as self-important) to the construction of our different relationships in the world (Part 1). This starts with our relationship with ourselves, as our nourished bodies raise questions relating to health, emotions,

pleasure and the construction of our identities – in other words, to the affirmation of the ‘self’ through food. Next, there are our relationships with others (our companions and fellow diners) through the conviviality (or animosity) of shared meals, the transmission of table etiquette and culinary know-how, the mixing of food cultures, the economic exchanges that take place between actors in food systems and so on. Sharing a meal is a way of connecting with others: eating the same flesh creates collective relationships, since literally incorporating this collective sustenance is, symbolically, to incorporate ourselves into the collective. Food also plays a key role in our spiritual relationships with invisible worlds, for instance, through offerings. Finally, food informs our relationships with the biosphere, with other non-human living beings, from the worlds of animals and plants but also across the entire microbial universe, which both forms part of us (our intestinal microbiota) and plays a role in the transformation and preservation of our food (through fermentation, for example).

After exploring these relationships, we take a long-term historical perspective to discuss the major issues facing contemporary food systems (Part 2). We first look at the industrialization of agriculture following the transition from a socio-metabolism based on energy from the sun to a fossil fuel-dependent socio-metabolism (relying first on coal and then on oil), which saw the establishment of increasingly specialized production sectors and the development of international trade. We then consider the history of the industrialization of the food supply (food processing industries, the globalization of trade, the concentration of players in food supply chains, the challenges associated with digital technology etc.) and the evolution of our eating habits in connection with these societal changes. This historical perspective helps shed light on how we reached the present situation, where the limitations of industrialized food systems are plain to see in the light of sustainability issues, with adverse effects on the environment, health, crops and social inequalities, among others.

We then describe our proposal for an ecology of food (Part 3), which calls for both articulating the different dimensions of food through which the bonds between the living are woven and reflecting on forms of political commitment to bring about sustainable food systems. Such transformation will contribute to individual health, justice and cohesion, as well as co-viability with non-humans. This highlights the importance of situating ourselves as being part of the living and of appreciating its diversity in order to develop forms of co-viability between environmental and social systems.

This multidimensional and political approach to food leads us to revisit a number of common food tenets or dictates (Part 4) surrounding sustainable food systems, namely the emphasis on increasing production to feed the planet, the use

of fortified foods to fight malnutrition, the transition from animal to vegetable protein consumption, the fight against food waste, food aid, the promotion of homemade food, the relocalization of our food supply and the power of ‘active consumers’.

Finally, this book aims to instil enthusiasm in the actors striving for the transformation of food systems (Part 5). To this end, we analyse the role of existing alternatives: the ‘world after tomorrow’ is already being experimented with today; this must be recognized and made known. This points to the challenge of scaling up these initiatives and raises the question of the roles that the private sector, academia and training actors, as well as public authorities, can play in order to stimulate, support and promote these transformations.

A progress report

It is important to consider this book as a work in progress and not as an end result. As stated in the preface, it is our attempt at articulating several years of discussions, papers, training sessions, symposia, research project outputs, publications and the like. It thus developed over the course of numerous encounters, whether fortuitous or sought out. This openness to diverse and disparate works relating to food obviously entails the risk of incompleteness in each of these areas. This is inevitable. The present book is not intended as a scientific work in the sense of advancing a particular disciplinary field of research. Its aim, first and foremost, is to offer readers a broad overview of the current challenges surrounding food systems in order to grasp their full complexity and be able to articulate seemingly unrelated issues. The authors we called upon for this book, and with whom we developed the different chapters, all have in common their involvement with themes long central to the Chair’s mandate.

Another bias that we openly acknowledge is our geographical prism. This book was written in France, which has a relatively singular relationship with food compared to other countries or regions that may have their own ways of understanding the world through the prism of their own food systems. Although we attempt to refer to these different understandings, the overall perspective of this book is certainly Eurocentric. We are well aware of this limitation and in no way wish to universalize our idiosyncrasies.

We wish you a delicious read and hope you will consume, share and disseminate this work without moderation.