

POSITION PAPER

Building alliances between producers and consumers by politicising consumption

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1 Description of problem

Over the last decades, agroecology has been inspiring thousands of social innovation initiatives, involving social organisations, researchers, extensionists, cooperation agencies, public managers, and consumers from around the world (Hinrichs, 2014; IPES-Food, 2015; El Bilali, 2019; HLPE, 2019). For the most part, however, these initiatives are local, often segmented, and they account for a very small percentage of food consumption (Gliessman, 2018). These experiences grow quantitatively (scaling out) but, from my point of view, not qualitatively and thus fail to achieve a leap of scale. This fact is not accidental and is due to the ‘rejection effect’ that the institutional framework subjects them to, leading them to encapsulation, conventionalisation, or simply failure (González de Molina et al., 2020). This rejection is the corporate food regime’s defensive response to the threat posed by these experiences. One example is organic food production in Europe: the institutional framework treats it as a distinctive quality label, leading organic production towards ‘conventionalisation’ through the market. Market imposes comparatively higher costs on organic farming due to the yield gap, the necessary investments in biodiversity, etc. (Darnhofer et al., 2010; Ramos et al., 2018).

To overcome these difficulties, the agroecological movement has proposed scaling-up strategies, for example, the construction of local food systems (Wezel and David, 2012;

Fraňková et al., 2017), the redesign of landscapes that makes the closing of biogeochemical cycles possible (Gliessman, 1998; Marull et al., 2019), and a transformation towards a sustainable diet or public policies that favour agroecological transition and change of scale (Ajates Gonzales et al., 2018; Sabourin et al., 2017; Giraldo and McCune, 2019). These strategies so far have had limited results. To implement all these measures in an integrated way and to guarantee a successful outcome, it is necessary to dismantle the existing institutional framework which is based on free-market rules and the hegemony of large food and agricultural input corporations (Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2017). Another way is to create niches that favour social experiments and their leaps of scale. This, however, requires ‘social majorities supporting change’ to impose the needed institutional change on states’ political agendas, which face the lobbying pressures from big corporations and interest groups.

It is not easy to build these majorities of change: the social agents fighting for an alternative food system are still a minority; they are fragmented and mostly local in scope. Furthermore, most of these movements are urban and consumption-focused (SAPEA, 2020), far from the first steps in the food chain. For their part, farmers’ movements centre their demands preferentially on fair prices and adequate levels of income. Eu-wide, they have even opposed the banning of certain pesticides in recent months, fearing the possible negative effects that such environmental and consumer protection

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measures could have on their vulnerable economies (van der Ploeg, 2020). In any event, farmers, who represent an ever-smaller share of the electorate, have a limited political influence. In short, the interests present in the food chain are fragmented, and the distance between the interests and expectations in the countryside and the cities is increasing further. This tendency towards fragmentation could be accentuated, in my opinion, by the Ecological Transition and the Green Pact launched by the new European Commission² if the “from farm to fork” strategy only supports measures to ban certain chemical plant protection products but not the farmers to make the transition economically viable.

2 Possible solution

Obviously, building these majorities of change will only be possible by involving the majority of society in a common political agenda. The task is impossible to accomplish without the required social alliances between producers and consumers. Traditionally, agroecology has exceedingly focused on mobilising the supply side, that is, on working with food producers. At the turn of the century, agroecology left the field of agriculture and demanded a change of orientation towards the food system as a whole, taking all the steps of the chain into account to establish a sustainable food strategy (Francis et al., 2003). But this change of approach has yet to be completed by focusing on mobilising demand or food consumption and assigning healthy food a pivotal role in the demands for practices that are also sustainable throughout the food chain (Schneider and Hoffmann, 2011). A strategy to achieve the change in approach would be to shift the focus currently set on production to eating. Nutrition itself connects multiple dimensions of social relations. Satisfying the endosomatic metabolism of human beings has become increasingly complex: it combines aspects related to physical and mental health, bodily well-being, cultural identity, the preservation of material and intangible heritage, the viability of productive agricultural activities, rural development, the health of agroecosystems, agri-food transformation activities, the sustainability of energy consumption, fair relations between developed and peripheral countries, etc. Food has become an integrating “thematic meeting point” of a range of social, economic, and environmental political spheres, which poses considerable governance challenges that have hitherto been poorly addressed (Renting and Wiskerke, 2010; Petrini et al., 2016).

The Spanish case is an illustration of this complexity. Spanish citizens today follow a diet that has abandoned healthy Mediterranean habits and acquired others that are responsible for over half of the population being obese or overweight (González de Molina et al., 2017). Meat, milk, and other dairy products are the main culprits. Spain is only one example of changes in eating habits worldwide. These

changes constitute a major factor of unsustainability, not only with regard to human health but also to the health of agroecosystems (González de Molina et al., 2020). In Spain, all food-related activities as a whole account for 29% of the primary energy consumed by the nation, including food for export. These eating habits are, in turn, the cause of the massive spillage of polluting substances in the soil, the air, the watercourses, and the food itself (González de Molina et al., 2019). A total of 109 million tons of animal and plant biomass are required by the Spanish to ingest more than 3,400 kcal capita⁻¹ day⁻¹, that is, 6.65 kg/person/day (Infante-Amate and González de Molina, 2013). The productivity of cropland has significantly multiplied, mainly thanks to the reconversion of irrigated dry land and intensive production under plastic. Meanwhile, a large part of the drylands in the country's interior, is less reactive to external inputs and therefore less productive, and natural pastures are gradually being abandoned (Soto et al., 2016). Paradoxically, vast areas need to be dedicated to grain and fodder production in peripheral countries in order to increase a population of livestock to meet high meat and dairy product demands. Infante-Amate et al. (2018) estimated the amount of ‘virtual agricultural land’ required by the Spanish diet. The data is overwhelming: Spain exports around 3 million hectares and imports 11 million; the deficit amounts to a total of 8 million hectares.

Consumers' concerns regarding the impacts on the environment and health are growing. Both collective and individual mobilisation around healthy eating is on the rise. But the demands or claims are diverse, fragmented, and even contradictory, and they present an obstacle to the building of a broad social alliance. To achieve such an alliance, it is necessary to reach a totalising political proposal capable of bringing together social groups. This proposal is more likely to arise from the demand side than from the supply side, that is, from the food consumption side. Indeed, the social complexity and the variety of forms of domination existing in post-industrial societies create conditions that favour the emergence of a wide range of conflicts and protests. All these conflicts can be coordinated through general demands or via “empty signifiers”, as proposed by Laclau and Mouffe (1985). These empty signifiers or totalising demands must be brought about by the ‘politicisation of food consumption’, that is, by turning food into a responsible act and therefore a political choice and through questioning the visible deficiencies of the food system, its structural problems, and the search for solutions.

The most obvious path of such politicisation lies in aspects related to human health. Food insecurity has become widespread worldwide under the corporate food regime, associated with cases of undernutrition and overnutrition. Overnutrition is already a common phenomenon in both the North and the South and is linked to increased intake of so-called ultra-processed foods (Monteiro et al., 2013). In high-income countries, poorer people are most affected by overweight and obesity as healthy food is more expensive than food based on processed products rich in sugars, oils, and other fats. The consumption patterns promoted by corporate food regime and publicity (fast food,

² European Commission (2020) Financing the green transition: The European Green Deal investment plan and just transition mechanism. Retrieved from <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_17> [at 13 March 2020]

soft drinks, etc.) are “obesogenic” and are not encouraging the adoption of healthy diets (Winson, 2013; Scrinis, 2013; Doytch et al., 2014; CIHEAM/FAO 2015). They present serious operational and governance challenges that are bringing about negative impacts on health with high economic costs (Burlingame and Dernini, 2010; Johnston et al., 2014; Tilman and Clark, 2014). Food is also the cause of the massive spillage of polluting substances in the soil, the air, the watercourses and the food itself (Hallström et al., 2014; Willett et al., 2019).

Another way of politicising consumption is the struggle for recognising the right to food as a human right (Ziegler, 2001). Despite being recognised in some international treaties, including the ‘International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights’³, many countries have not yet incorporated it into their legislation. The right to food is not only a matter of access and enjoyment of sufficient amounts of food; it is also a question of nutritional quality and sustainability in the way food safety is produced. The guarantee of this right is, first and foremost, a political issue, one of governance, where the state is fundamentally responsible, but where the participation of society is indispensable. It is essential that public policy is jointly developed by the different actors involved in the food system. This participation can be channelled by creating forums in which to share experiences and generate political proposals appropriate for all citizens. Food Policy Councils (Harper et al., 2009) are a good example of this.

Very interesting discussions on how to feed the cities are currently taking place around the so-called Milan Urban Food Policy Pact (2015). This is a clear example of how food consumption can be politicised⁴. Over 209 cities around the world are taking part, and governance instruments have been created around it. It is the first international protocol at the municipal level, aimed at developing sustainable food systems. It includes a strategic action framework with recommendations to create favourable conditions for effective action, promote sustainable and nutritious diets, ensure social and economic fairness, promote food production, improve supply and distribution, and limit food waste, among other actions. Similarly, but more specifically, agroecological initiatives have sprung up all over the world. Worthy of note in Spain, for example, is the Network of Cities for Agroecology⁵, which aims to “create a process of exchange of knowledge, experiences and resources on food policies between Spanish cities that includes local social organisations”. Similarly, urban and peri-urban agriculture favours not only the removal of barriers between the countryside and the city but also the politicisation of food consumption in this area.

These and other “generalist” demands for sustainable food also allow the formation of the ‘demos’ or people who are called upon to exercise food sovereignty (Holt-Giménez and Altieri, 2013). This re-signifies the concept of food sovereignty itself, which can be considered to be more orientated towards access to healthy and sustainable food. It is about overcoming the fragmentation of existing social interests

and groups along the food chain by recovering the democratic capacity of citizens to decide (i.e. their sovereignty) what is produced, how it is distributed, and what is eaten. This claim can involve highly diverse social groups, starting with the farmers themselves. The majority of the world population are suffering from the negative impacts of the corporate food regime and are therefore potentially against a regime that is directly responsible for hunger, malnutrition, rural poverty, structural unemployment in agriculture, and significant harm to health and the environment.

3 Conclusions

The politicisation of consumption in its various manifestations, in my opinion, seems to be the most effective way of articulating diverse interests towards a unified mobilisation against the corporate food regime. This mobilisation also brings to light the fundamental contradiction between the social majority and a small group of big food corporations. In accordance with Laclau (2005), the role of articulating diverse interests lies precisely in the construction of a global antagonism, capable of creating the agents of social change through mobilisation. The political terrain of health, food democracy or food sovereignty and right to food is where this unifying and emotional discourse on food consumption can most easily thrive, allowing it to generalise protest and challenge the cultural and political hegemony of the corporate food regime.

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³ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx>

⁴ <https://www.milanurbanfoodpolicypact.org/>

⁵ <https://www.ciudadesagroecologicas.eu/el-proyecto-de-red/>

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