Fondoazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, Laboratorio Expo

Patto della Scienza: Food aesthetics and culture of the senses

a cura di U. Fabietti, F. Riva, M. Badii

Contributo n° 18
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Executive summary

The scientific community has an intellectual duty to question itself on issues of radical importance and the responsibility to identify what is the problem, opening up space for an exchange of ideas and knowledge on the important theme “Feeding the planet”. Several issues are at stake. Firstly, the need to increase the availability of quality food for a growing population, confronting the dynamics of access and distribution of food resources have at a global level and developing production systems that are at the same time both efficient and fair. Secondly, the issue of environmental sustainability: it is crucial to identify solutions that will ensure energy for all, by also questioning the impact that our food preferences have on the environment. Sustainability is concerned with lifestyles, with the territories, with traditions and the multifaceted and ever changing nature of food cultures.

In this socio-economic context, the goal is to identify areas of intervention in which it is urgent to address the challenge of social sustainability: protection of collective goods, redistribution of wealth, new mechanisms of participation; and to support, in a dimension that opposes the dynamics of strongly unequal contemporary growth through social innovation and new forms of urban governance.

From these pressing issues, the researchers involved in the project LabExpo, have identified twelve main questions that need to be addressed in order to move toward a more sustainable planet. These questions are very diverse, ranging from food security to governance practices, and address the many facets of sustainability in contemporary societies.

The main questions are the following:

Food security

The latest estimates by the United Nations report that 805 million people are chronically undernourished, thus highlighting food insecurity as a widely spread phenomenon caused by complex issues strictly intertwined with another compromising availability, access, utilization and/or stability of food resources. In order to tackle such issues, single actions taken by stakeholders operating
independently are not sufficient, nor effective. Instead, coordination is central to create an environment conducive to the implementation of tailored measures ensuring food security. In this regard, social participation, inclusion of vulnerable groups, and the adoption of an integrated approach taking count of technical, political and social aspects, are paramount. Particularly, agriculture is a game changer in addressing food insecurity and hunger worldwide. Public and private partners at all levels should thus act in concert in order to implement ad hoc initiatives both at policy and field level to raise agricultural productivity, promote farm and non-farm activities, strengthen value chains and access to market, reduce vulnerability to environmental crisis and close the gender gap.

*Safe and nutritious food for all*

Even when access to food resources is ensured, food security is at risk if those resources are neither nutritious nor safe. Undeniably, all over the world a large portion of the population is dealing with healthy issues related to malnutrition and foodborne diseases. As food safety is strictly dependent on how food is processed, stored and consumed, clearly emerges the necessity of raising awareness, simplifying rules, improving skills and infrastructures, adapting food safety monitoring and management systems in order to guarantee healthy nutritional status worldwide.

Healthy nutritional status is furthermore guarantee by balanced energy and nutrients intake resulting from good care and feeding practices, food preparation, and diversity of the diet. This, combined with the physical activities, determines the nutritional status of individuals. Due to the complex framework, a systemic approach, as nutrition sensitive agriculture and food system programs, are a sustainable- environmentally and socially - and gender-sensitive answer to re-establish a human healthy nutritional status in synergy with the environment worldwide.

*The way to future food production*

Since the 1960s world population has grown from three billion to more than seven billion. Such a growth came along with a significant increase in food
demand requiring the intensification of production processes that gradually led to the depletion and deterioration of finite natural resources. Fertile soils, water, biodiversity and energy have long been mismanaged, which compromised the sustainability of modern production systems and threatened global food security. The need to rethink, design and implement more environmentally sustainable and socially just production systems is thus getting urgent. In this framework, the agroecologic approach appears promising, as it is based on more biodiverse and resilient production systems less dependent on external inputs. Similarly, a more efficient use of water resources, the implementation of innovative and smart solutions for valuing alternative energy sources and reducing agricultural inputs, the definition of strategies to reduce food waste and the inclusion of consumers in designing sustainable production and consumption patterns are increasingly relevant.

**Aesthetics of Food and Cultures of the Senses**

Likes and dislikes of food are social constructions shaped through the cultural elaboration of the sensorial experience. Taste is a form of social action through which societies discriminate between friends, enemies and guests, building ethnic, class and gender differences. Their transmission from one generation to the other leads to the awareness of who we are and the memory of what we have been: by mean of them, identities and belongings are defined. The issue of taste is a political one: the homologation and privation processes linked to tasting experience, act as deculturation and dependence patterns. Furthermore, the impoverishment of tastes is not only due to a simplification of flavors, but also to the loss of symbolic dimension, to the inability of creating meaningful relationships, whether “around the table” as much as by the retailers and the producers as well.

**Food and Belonging: bodies, territories and agri-cultures**

Patterns of food production and consumption are approached by anthropology as tools of identity construction at the collective as well as at the individual level. Following large-scale industrialization of agriculture and agro-business, food cultures have radically changed in southern and northern countries: a disjuncture has imposed more and more between the farmers or those who
produce food, the consumers and their territories, as well as between cultures and ‘agri/cultures’. In this scenario, emergent and innovative patterns of production, distribution and consumption, are redefining the symbolic and collective dimension of food (Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale and Des in Italy, Amap in France, seeds banks, rural networks of food security). At the same time a growing number of individuals have become aware of the over determined nature of their alimentary choices and have voiced critical concerns towards the assimilation of aliments void of identitary character, and have embraced a new-found interest in the idea of food as a means to assert identity.

**Food Heritage**

It is in the category of Intangible Cultural Heritage whose definition is increasingly contested and not adopted by all UNESCO state members that food practices officially enter into the dynamics of heritage institutionalization. Central to the issue of food heritage are the anthropological critics to the notions of tradition and authenticity as well as the attention given to the process of transmission in the definition of a cultural heritage. Indeed, the challenge posed by the cultural heritage is that of moving from the original etymology of the legal term, which is conceived as private heritage often selectively transmitted from the family through father, towards a notion of cultural heritage which is shared, recognised, consciously and democratically participated in by everybody.

**Collective goods**

Common resources have an important redistributive function, being a vehicle for direct and equitable access to important means across all socio-economic strata. They also work as a sort of ‘social glue’, which can contribute to a group’s sense of belonging, cohesiveness and cultural resilience. Collective goods are common-pool resources that are de facto used by specific groups in time and space, namely by collectivities at different levels: local, national, regional, global. Collective goods can comprise a variegated list of tangible and intangible items, around which potential conflicts may arise because the protection of access of one collectivity may stand in contrast – and reduce – the access of another one. Protecting collective goods is crucial for the scope of
feeding the planet, yet the challenges to face are many and complex, including large-scale abuses, unclear or unfair definitions of property rights as well as the lack of shared consciousness.

**Social sustainability**

Inequality is expected to play a major role in the post-2015 development agenda. Situations that create and perpetuate social disadvantage play a major role for access to food and for malnutrition, too. In line with the Human Development Paradigm, social sustainability can be interpreted as the set of circumstances in which large asymmetries of human freedoms and opportunities within and across generations are being avoided. Currently, asymmetries in the world can be traced back to different factors, such as increasing wealth concentrations, inequality of opportunities, or lack of agency and participation. In tackling food insecurity – and in a broader sense social disadvantage – a main challenge is to actively promote shared responsibility: top-down interventions and bottom-up movements involving different actors and complementary actions are both necessary in order to feed the planet. Responsible consumption and production localize global problems; and changes in institutions, policies and practices can globalize local concerns.

**Access to energy**

Access to modern energy services, intended as access to electricity and to clean cooking facilities, is a fundamental condition for sustainable development, given its key role in the provision of clean water, sanitation, healthcare, reliable and efficient lighting, heating, food security, mechanical power, transport and telecommunication services. A large share of the global population still lacks access to electricity (1.3 billion) and relies on traditional methods and fuels to cook and heat (2.3 billion), with serious danger for health. Reaching the target of universal access to modern energy, while ensuring environmental sustainability and economic development is a great challenge that involves everybody, at all levels: international organizations, governments, firms, civil society and individuals.

**Socio-economic development**
Socio-economic development has become an issue because continuous economic growth has come to a halt and there are serious threats of decline and stagnation in many western cities. In general, cities face major difficulties in creating economic opportunities in a framework of high competition, shrinking markets and reduced resources. The contributions collected from experts all over the world point to new forms of production in the postindustrial city, in particular a collaborative mode of production based on the sharing of knowledge and skills, which has begun to emerge in several industries. In envisioning the possibilities of economic development, it is important to take into account the debate about the role of these new forms in the future of urban economies. What is certain is that they are emerging thanks to resources and conditions which are peculiar to cities.

**Governance**

The urban governance processes are progressively losing democratic dimensions and egalitarian substance because of the asymmetric influence of powerful élites, particularly economic ones. The weakening of representative democracy is causing the disaffection of the ordinary citizen from politics institutions. Politics has become a private affair whereby decisions are made through exchanges of favours between the elected and the lobbies. Alongside these tendencies, number of events, processes and phenomena have emerged that, despite not being prevalent, allow for some countertendencies to be registered, showing seeds of change at different levels in the system of urban governance. Some of these phenomena are connected with new technologies and with the role these can have in facilitating inclusive governance Other phenomena are manifested in politics itself, participatory budgets for instance; others concern the role of non-profit organizations or civic society enterprises that promote activities and services that are not provided by the state; others still are connected to urban social movements.

**Social cohesion**

The issue of social cohesion concerns the need for the city to overcome disruptive features of our “liquid modernity”, such as fragmentation and individualization, and, more importantly, increasing inequalities, social
polarization, marginalization and exclusion. In the face of these disintegrative processes, we discuss emerging practices of social innovation that aim to respond to unmet social needs through the re-organization of socio-spatial relations, the activation and empowerment of individuals and communities, highlighting their potential to resist and counter these exclusionary and socially corrosive trends.
Food aesthetics and culture of the senses

Likes and dislikes of food are social constructions shaped through the cultural elaboration of the sensorial experience (Elias, 1969; Macbeth, 1991; Howes, 1991; 2003 Anderson, 2005). Their transmission from one generation to the other leads to the awareness of who we are and the memory of what we have been (Sutton, 2001; 2010; Holtzman, 2006): by mean of them, identities and belongings are defined. Likes and dislikes are incorporated forms of personal and collective memory that are often marked by tears and lacks, by violence, diasporas and famine (Stoller, 1995). Indeed the issue of taste is a political one, with clear economical implications (Bayart, 1989; Appadurai, 1981): the taste is a form of social action through which societies discriminate between friends, enemies and guests, building ethnic, class and gender differences (Bourdieu, 1979). Tastes, food preferences and aversions, are characterized by changes, sometimes slow sometimes fast, ephemeral or lasting. Today, due to the establishment of the agri-food industry on a global scale, there is the spreading of standardized products that lead to a sort of taste simplification, to a planning of the sensorial experience for economic ends, and to a deeper social conditioning. This is achieved through multisensory marketing strategies, through the production of ready-made food with high level of sweeteners, fat and salt and through the creation of engineered synthetic flavors and food shapes (Roberts, 2008; Moss, 2013). It is a phenomenon experienced both in the South and in the North, in the rich countries as well as in the poorer ones and that is particularly significant in the economically and culturally disadvantaged social strata, who are the main junk food consumers. At the same time a quite elitist search for culturally rooted tastes has grown, tastes which have often in fact been lost in the past, that have to be recovered or re-invented by means of procedural guidelines or certifications. In this way the values of “authenticity” and genuineness have to deal also with culture, linking food, memory and territory.

All these processes of taste and consumption reconfiguration have to be thought in the framework of the wider aestheticization process of daily life that covers all the spheres of social life (Featherstone, 1990; Rifkin, 1995;
Lipovetsky, Serroy, 2013): leisure and entertainment, beauty and sensorial gratification become objects of mass consumption. The process of aestheticization becomes particularly evident in the connections between food, arts, design and fashion. Increasingly, the differentiation among similar food products takes place through their aesthetic reworking, by packaging, advertising, brands, logos, and “signed” food. The food appearance, the visual dimension of food experience, becomes the most relevant aspect for the consumption patterns, especially when the urge to eat goes along with the equally powerful one of fasting in order “to stay in shape”. The danger is that much of our food experience comes down to a play of appearances.

Is it possible to address some policy recommendations to the bottom-up policy-makers body, economical and social ones, fulfilling commitments in the different domain of food production, distribution and consumption, policy recommendations that allow, in a non-prescriptive way, to strengthen the connection between taste and culture; or to contribute to the contemporary in a creative way, going beyond the simple acceptance of the current anomy or the nostalgic degustation lure?

When we speak about taste we should keep in mind that it has not to do with an exclusive enjoyment, only for people that can afford it, but a crucial anthropological issue. At the same time we should be aware that the majority of world population, because of their difficulties to get access to food, has little chance to have culturally meaningful taste experiences.

In spite of the globalization of the agri-food industry and the resulting taste homologation and impoverishment of food cultures, the construction of the local sense of community, hierarchy and social distinctions, it must be understood in establishing connections with the outside: the cultural dimension of cooking and of food practices cannot be split from the formation of trans-ethnic and trans-national tastes, from relations of exchange, diffusion and appropriation processes.

The opposition between the globalized taste of the food industry and that of the regional ways of cooking, can be partly mitigated. In fact the regional cuisines are increasingly becoming exportation goods and destinations for an
international culinary tourism (Poulain 2015). On the other hand also the serial products have to be readjusted to local tastes (Phillips 2006).

In many cases the relationships between the local and the global have to take into account several other levels like the aspiration to “national cuisines” that often become a tool, not without the risk of culinary chauvinisms, for the political construction of a nation (Appadurai, 1988; Belasco, Scranton 2002). From this point of view it would be appropriate to promote a greater awareness of the changing and historically made character of food traditions in order to mitigate all ethnocentrism.

In wealthy societies, where economic crisis is paradoxically going to disseminate food insecurity, the patterns of consumption are becoming more and more omnivores, while tastes are increasingly opening to curiosity.

Sensory food experiences tend to be reduced to the act of consumption: daily cooking time is decreasing (replaced by snacks, fast foods and restaurants services) while a vision of cooking is turning into leisure, as a strongly aesthetized and mediatized experience (Csordas, 2015). The consumption, notwithstanding the fact that it has been individualized, remains nonetheless a social act, a conclusive moment of a decisional chain about what and how to produce and to distribute, decisions that always concern environment, life and death of people and animals, aspects often hidden and unperceived. From this point of view, the impoverishment of tastes is not only due to a simplification of flavors, but also to the loss of symbolic dimension, to the inability of creating meaningful relationships, whether “around the table” as much as by the retailers and the producers as well. If the only choosing criterion become the free individual pleasure (influenced in fact by advertising and marketing), taste becomes de-socialized and backed out of any kind of sense of responsibility. In an opposite direction seem to go the critic patterns of consumptions, which move from concerns of social justice and needs of simplicity and frugality. In this heterogeneous world, which gathers spontaneous associations (like GAS, Solidarity Purchase Group), Onlus (like Slow Food) or leading food businesses (like Eataly), matters of taste combine ethic and aesthetic attitudes, because “Today the paradox of pleasure is right in the rigor that you should impose to
yourself in order to reach it" (Petrini, 2001). In this way, frugality turns into distinction, altruism is practiced through consumption experience and social engagement becomes ‘cool’. While running the risk of a reduction of culture to a range of aestheticized products, these experiences indicate a path to simplicity, quite different from levelling and simplification.

The creation of new ways of life also requires an aesthetic work, as in the case of ecological design for foods (Finessi, 2013). It involves creative socialized practices, as in the forms of participatory design (Fuad-Luke, 2009) or practices which could tomorrow be within the reach of many, favoring customized aesthetics of food, as suggested by the 3D printing or the possibility to produce meat "in vitro" in their own home. These examples show that in addition to the "alternative" forms of consumption, other social forms can be identified, in which “corporate convergence coexists with grassroot convergence” (Jenkins, 2006). Today forms of the consumption increasingly require the active intervention of the consumers who claims their autonomy, through unexpected and divergent uses of goods (Miller, 2010). Here new socialized food practices could arise, that would be more in tune with the "liquid" social relations of today. The experience of food goes more and more through the mediation of images: those of advertising, television cooking shows, food packaging or specifically created settings to sell and consume food. Especially in the arts the relation with food appears increasingly more relevant. From one side the food-art connection becomes a sort of cultural commodity that boosts the touristic economy (for example the combination of art exhibitions with wine and food tourism), and from the other side it blurs the line between culinary art and the art made by artists. Not only many artistic works actually consist of cooking and modeling food, but also well-known chefs, in the role of artists, are invited to take part in the Biennales (Perullo, 2013).

Beyond the artworks created for exhibitions, there are also projects, such as that experienced in Lab Expo (Bargna, Scardi Food which links and food which separates. Feeding, art and anthropology) in which artists and anthropologists work together in socially sensible fields, in order to better understand problems. The arts rely on daily life as many creative professions rely on arts. This is the case of the food designers (Simonetti, 2010; Mangano, 2014) that project “food
objects” and plan “food architectures” or the shop fitter (from supermarkets to restaurants) that has to set up multisensory contexts encouraging consumption. The risk is that the food will just turn into an "object", carefully designed but ephemeral, free from all communities of practices and life contexts. The spectacle of cooking is not confined to TV screens but is spread over many media platforms leading to the proliferation of show cooking, home contests among friends, and food and wine tours, which replace everyday cooking with “exceptional events”. Even here, however, the re-modeling of food not only meets commercial needs, but it can also help sustainable development policies, as in the case of projects to promote insects consumption in the West, through a remodeling of the insect meat, aimed to inhibits Western dislike.

In conclusion, if it’s true that the taste dimension is one of the domains throughout which culture is produced in complex and diversified patterns, the homologation and privation processes linked to tasting experience, act as deculturation and dependence patterns affecting the quality of life of people. Thus, the taste issues could be reformulated in terms of cultural rights, the individual and collective right of getting healthy and satisfying food, good to eat and to think as well. It is time to foster that kind of convivial situations (Illich, 1973; Caillé et al., 2011) in which the care for the forms of the relationships with the world, the food and the people, takes an ethical and social value, promoting responsible consumption, self-production and local scale distribution. Sensory and aesthetic experience of food appears as one of the ways of dealing with the world and the others: through the taste, senses meet meanings, and they give "flavor to the world", feeding the "taste of life "(Le Breton, 2006).
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