

# Carta di Milano

**Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli,  
Laboratorio Expo**

## Patto della Scienza: Food Heritage

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

Contributo n° 20

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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 Heritage

The main issue of the topic food heritage has gradually emerged in the context of the scientific direction of three events (two workshops and a lecture) and the lectures given during the advanced training course of Anthropological Cultural Heritage during 2014. Experience of research and teaching have interacted with the more specific and pioneering role of wine heritage to promote the recognition of a much wider understanding of “food heritage”. The debate amongst colleagues engaged in the events has led to the agreement that in order to speak about food heritage, it is necessary (for scientific and communicative ends) to define first and more generally the meaning of “heritage”, and then of “food heritage” in particular. After the recent debate on the cultural wine landscape, 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. Despite their being material, food practices are deemed as Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO. Michael Herzfeld (Harvard University) disagrees with this distinction: *“I believe in Gian Battista Vico who assumed the centrality of thought as part of the corporality itself. As a material act, eating has some conceptual sides. For analytical reasons, we use to distinguish them, but they are different aspects of the same thing. Separating tangible from intangible heritage and situating food from one side rather than the other it doesn't make much sense, because nutrition is both”* (Herzfeld, 2014).

Food practices as an institutionalized category within the wider domain of Cultural Heritage is quite recent. Initially in Europe and then in other continents, changes in food culture have brought the development of cultural policies, alongside agricultural policies and tourism that have influenced them. The focus of these policies has been directed toward the heritagisation of products, territories, food practices and diets. This implies decisions, exclusions and conflicts: since not everything can be turned into cultural heritage, not everything is transmissible. According to Charles-Édouard De Suremain (Institut de Recherche pour le Développement du Musée National d'Histoire Naturelle, Paris) we could talk about: *“Horizontal and vertical transmission”* (De

Suremain, 2014). De Suremain argues that from a methodological perspective, one of the anthropological tasks is the study of the ways food heritage has been transmitted. The issue of transmission, in fact, is strictly related to food heritage education and training. Food heritage is here considered not only in its festive dimension, but in its everyday dimension as well. This growth of awareness about the daily feature of food heritage could easily be connected to the issue of food security. As De Suremain states, social change and cultural transformations could be responsible for drawing together food security, heritage and cultural practices. *“In the struggle for food security, there is the anxiety to influence directly the course of events”*. Going ahead with his reflection, De Suremain suggests intertwining the implications of security, poverty and food inequality. His goal is to know if: *“Notions of immaterial cultural practice and food heritage are solvable into poverty issues. Put in other words, if these notions can resist the analysis of social, cultural, economic and political situations which are different from the historical conditions that allowed their own development in Europe”*.

*What could researchers do to ensure that food heritage does not correspond solely to regulations, disciplinary norm, or other institutional criteria but instead that this type of heritage becomes a shared legacy, deemed a public good, guaranteeing food security, accessible to a wider population, and hence able to transform relationships between producers, distributors and consumers?*

The lively international debate about heritagisation has made clear a general tendency to deploy abused and vague references to tradition, and a scarce memory of the historical processes. The anthropological research, adopting sometimes a critical posture, underlines the risks that food processes of heritagization could imply. In this sense, Herzfeld states: *“The risk is to stop a cultural process that is always in progress. Culture is not a fixed entity, it is a process, a flux. If we attempt to differentiate certain things, and affirm that they are our heritage, we thus detach them from their own social context too. Concerning food practices, if we decide that certain dishes are ‘authentic’ or ‘original’, belonging to a specific culture, at that moment we do exactly what*

*archeologists usually do when they dig: destroying as they are digging. When we speak about food practices, as if they were a sort of heritage, I totally agree with the idea of preserving some dishes from oblivion. But the problem is that, in so doing, we create a sort of museum and a museum is not a thing alive anymore. That is the tomb of culture, that is the place in which culture gets reified and thus separated from the flux which defines it. In that way we get entrapped within the logics deployed by the national States. The UNESCO follows the same bureaucratic logics. If the national States have established that food is an intangible heritage, that's it. No way of discussion. We will end up with a series of lists and little lists of food considered authentic as heritage, and forget all those complex processes that produce hybrid food, for example”.*

A definition of food heritage devoid of ambiguity cannot exist. Rather, the definitions are numerous, and loose. Since food heritage is both a commodity and a perishable heritage, it opens up to new paths of research and it needs to be more objectified. The challenges for anthropological research are multiple. Considering food heritage only in its institutionalized forms is not enough. De Suremain suggests that: *“It is time to reconsider the taken for granted opposition between the institutionalized heritages approved by the Ministry of Culture of the different nations, and UNESCO, and the spontaneous, bottom-up heritage constructions”.* Seen from Latin America, where De Suremain undertakes his fieldwork, the difference between those configurations of heritage does not seem so clear: *“Institutionalized heritages cannot do without local and ordinary heritages”.* Indeed, pointing at the ongoing process of transmission of food practices from one generation to the next as well as between cultures, and making efforts in order to promote a social and historical awareness about those practices, would offer greater dynamism to the analysis of heritagisation. Therefore, it seems necessary to critically examine the notion of authenticity that nowadays is strongly supported by the mass media. Herzfeld believes that authenticity is: *“a very dangerous word: not only because it is able to exclude, but also it is connected to power. The same logic underlying the concept of cultural heritage is based on the idea of authenticity as a natural and well-defined entity”.* Heritagisation requires both choices and exclusions at the same time. That implies the growth of potential conflicts and, for that reason,

Herzfeld provocatively suggests considering social conflicts as part of the definition of cultural heritage. That means that social conflicts around heritage shouldn't be neutralized by means of the power; rather, they should be included in dynamics that bring the concept of cultural heritage itself into question. De Suremain affirms that it is necessary *"to avoid the exploitation of the process of heritagisation and to give more space to values"*.

The correlation between food heritage and politics unveils specific national policies pointed towards the reinforcement of their internal cohesion, through the institutional establishment of their cuisines. Herzfeld affirms: *"As Arjun Appadurai has demonstrated in relation to Indian recipes, there was not an Indian cuisine as we mean it today. Rather, a national cuisine has been created through of specific historical periods by means of cooking books. I believe that the same has happened in Italy and in many other countries. The gastronomy becomes an important element in the definition of a national culture directed to create internal cohesion. Therefore, the result is a bureaucratic culture. For a bureaucrat, it is very hard to define a cultural phenomenon as a continuous flux because he requires an immutable definition. I would prefer exhibitions about the brawls, difficulties, debates, exclusions, tensions and discontents that rise up in every attempt of heritagisation"*. To some extent, the recognition of a collective heritage can become a resource for local economies. Herzfeld believes that *"an open debate on the processes of food heritagisation would be the right beginning for an anthropological research programme which focuses on the critique of the abuse of power. Asking why certain things are deemed as either national, or regional or local, is a key-question which leads to the core of the creation process of power relations. In my opinion, cultural anthropology has to be always political. Anthropology is the discipline par excellence that has the ability to recognize the working of power relations in the apparently insignificant details of social life. Food heritage has become a battlefield for a rather invisible fight among different political forces and other food activists. When we speak about policy, it is as if we were referring only to political elections and we surrender to the definitions given by the politicians themselves. Instead if we look at the micro-politics of social life, including food consumption, we access a much more intimate area: the one that both national*

*and regional authorities often exclude us from. That is part of what I have defined cultural intimacy”.*

Approaching the issue of wine cultural heritage from a transnational perspective, Marion Demossier (University of Southampton) highlights how the distinction between Old Europe and the New World has lost its epistemological relevance. Demossier wonders if *“the notion of private land heritage as World Heritage raises questions that so far have been considered as taboos within the debates amongst culture professionals and people working on cultural policies”* (Demossier, 2014). Demossier, starting from a broader perspective related to the emerging use of wine heritage as a locally distinct practice of place-making, problematizes : *“Heritage as a source of division and tension of the local-global connections. At the same time it is the subject of several financial speculations and its cultural integrity is at the centre of fervent debates”.*

The challenge posed by 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.



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