10

# A commitment to food system transformation

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*Food is an inherently political issue. We argue that this means inspired commitment is needed in order to keep faith in the possibilities of the food system transition and that this faith is key to overcoming resistance to change.*

This chapter expands on the second meaning that can be attributed to food ecology as a commitment to achieving sustainable food systems. This commitment is driven by awareness of the failure of industrialized modes of food production, processing and distribution and the inadequacy of the associated modes of consumption to address environmental, social and health issues (Chapter 7). This is not a new movement; many different actors have been campaigning for years to partially or even totally transform our food systems. The focus has often been on agricultural production methods or product processing and commercialization. Only recently – as illustrated by the growing use of the term 'food system' – have more downstream segments of the food chain (distribution, consumption, waste management) and governance issues attracted more attention.

Food directly concerns all human beings and is pivotal to the everyday life of citizens, making it an inherently political issue. As Richard Wilk (2006) points out, 'food is both an effective symbol and a concrete entity capable of catalysing political and social movements'. More broadly, for Jeffrey Pratt and Peter Luetchford (2014), 'food has become a focal point for action (and reflection) on contemporary economic processes [. . .] and the most prominent area in which people try to realise an alternative economy'. This chapter considers commitment in the sense of Howard S. Becker (1960), that is, as 'an alignment of convictions and practices' (Rodet, 2018) and discusses the driving forces and principles underpinning the transformation of food systems within the framework of food ecology. We put forward several proposals to guide the actors striving for change, namely building

commitment around an inspiring narrative, developing the capacity for action in complex environments and taking a stand in power struggles.

## An inspiring narrative

At a time when many countries are experiencing a crisis of political representation, compounded by growing communitarianism and the generalization of cognitive bias as a result of so-called filter bubbles,[1] addressing sustainability issues requires renewing the dominant imaginaries. This includes resituating food – which links humans to themselves, to other humans and to the biosphere – within an inspiring narrative. Why should this narrative, which underpins the commitment discussed here, be inspiring? Contemporary philosophers such as Baptiste Morizot (2022) point out that, from a vantage point like that propounded by Spinoza, commitment subsists over time thanks to the confluence of two seemingly antagonistic feelings – namely injustice and enthusiasm.

Injustice sparks indignation and leads to problems being denounced, thereby imparting an initial, combative dimension to commitment. With regard to food, this indignation, shared by a range of actors, stems from the realization that food systems are primarily geared towards the reproduction of economic stakeholders' capital at the expense of individual health, social justice and environmental conservation (Chapter 7). Exposing the extent of food insecurity (Chapter 15), animal suffering and pesticide impacts on living organisms, for instance, thus galvanizes action against these injustices. It is also often indignation that spurs the adoption of responsible consumption practices (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2009) (Chapter 18). Through these practices, eaters voice their ethical criticism of food production methods (e.g. through vegetarianism or veganism), address human and environmental health concerns (e.g. by supporting organic farming or boycotting certain products) or take action in response to calls for economic justice (e.g. by supporting fair trade; Fischler, 2015; Fouilleux and Michel, 2020).

The growing number of collective grievances surrounding food expressed throughout the twentieth century reflects the emergence of a form of food activism (Siniscalchi, 2014). These different forms of commitment – including activist movements (e.g. Via Campesina or Slow Food), local civil society (e.g. efforts to reform school catering) and networks of actors pursuing economic

[1] The information we access online has already been filtered according to our interests identified during earlier browsing sessions, thus fostering forms of intellectual and cultural isolation.

initiatives (e.g. short supply chains or cooperative supermarkets) – challenge the conventional food system, which is deemed unfair and destructive (Nestle, 2009; Siniscalchi, 2015). They also offer alternatives that advocate a different model.

Faced with the sheer magnitude of the task at hand, however, commitment based solely on this sense of injustice can lead to frustration, deepening resentment and rigid radicalization. Hence, commitment must also be fuelled by genuine enthusiasm, or even 'a politicized sense of wonder' (Truong and Morizot, 2020), to enable individual and collective capacity for action to grow exponentially. Commitment itself is inspiring in that it enables us to experiment with new ways of relating to ourselves, others and the world. It is thus not just about taking a stand against a dysfunctional food system: it also involves committing ourselves to developing alternatives that could renew our social and environmental interactions.

## Weaving ties with the community of the living

The raison d'être and purpose of the commitment that underpins food ecology are tightly linked: it is to interlace the threads of life, to weave together individuals, societies and the biosphere. This approach does not overlook the conflicts that permeate both socioecological and food systems; in line with the principles of permaculture, it is sometimes necessary to form alliances with certain entities in order to counter others (pests, pathogens etc.) (Centemeri, 2019). Yet we also have to reconsider what we call pests and acknowledge their role as indicators and even regulators. Ecology is therefore a game-changing catalyst that fosters a diverse range of arrangements of living organisms in viable biospheres specific to their respective contexts, rather than a single model geared towards maximizing economic wealth within food systems.

The narrative conveyed by food ecology thus calls for a new social imaginary in which food is a means of redefining the links between the living. It calls for considering food as a means of 'touching down' – that is, of building roots not in the territories where we live but in those on which we depend for our subsistence (Latour, 2018) in order to forge relationships of interdependence, protection and care (between ourselves and other human and non-human organisms). Similarly, Laura Centemeri (2019) approaches permaculture as the 'art of reinhabiting' the shared home (*oikos*). Echoing a vision of food as a common good, this perspective thus posits collective well-being as the raison d'être of food systems. If shaped by a so-called socio-diversity of alternatives,

these systems should guarantee access to food that is adequate for and sought by all while promoting the multidimensional nature of food (Vivero Pol et al., 2020). The structure of food systems must therefore now be rethought based on new principles guided by ecology: diversity (in the field, on the plate but also in the forms of organization of food systems), resilience (e.g. to climate change), combinations and symbioses (e.g. with microorganisms, which are present all the way from the soil to the stomach), the maintenance of reserves (in contrast with just-in-time 'efficiency'), cycle-based functioning (seasons, elements), sensory interactions (associated with the proximity between actors, with livestock) and related ecological dynamics.

Food ecology is rooted in the emergence of new relationships in the world, as advocated by certain scientists and philosophers. First, the scientific 'socio-ecological co-viability' paradigm (Barrière et al., 2019) is built on the observation that social and ecological systems are intertwined. Its proposed responses to major global environmental challenges are thus informed by a new 'social contract' between humans and the rest of the biosphere to which they belong and on which they depend. This approach encourages us to move beyond the division between instrumental rationality – according to which the biosphere serves humans – and non-instrumental rationality – which posits that the biosphere exists for reasons other than the simple benefits that human societies reap from it (Mace, 2014). It calls for thinking of individuals, societies and the biosphere as forming part of a single interdependent socioecological unit. Second, from a philosophical perspective, every human being is encouraged to 'get reacquainted' by rethinking their relationship with living beings. This involves becoming aware of oneself as a living being and as belonging to a wider community of living beings but also acknowledging the intrinsic value of other ways of living and constructing territory (Morizot, 2016, 2022; Coccia, 2018; Despret, 2021; Legros and Damasio, 2021). This new relationship with the living stems from a renewed commitment, no longer to defending nature as external to us but to our embodying a 'nature that can defend itself' in interaction with the rest of the living world.

## Principles to guide commitment

When fuelled by an inspiring narrative, commitment leads to taking tangible action to transform food systems. Setting such change in motion is particularly complex for several reasons: it is contextual; it is unpredictable over the long

term; it can take multiple forms; and it is restricted by the interdependence between the different components of the food system (within and outside this system – energy metabolism, public policies in different areas, international trade rules etc.).

First, the implementation of change is necessarily shaped by the specific features of the context at hand (spatial, cultural, political, economic, social, environmental etc.). There are no one-size-fits-all inherently sound solutions; the suitability of a solution depends on the context, and the interdependencies that underpin alliances among humans and between humans and non-humans are constantly evolving (Centemeri, 2019). Observation, consultation and action must therefore be articulated together from the outset and throughout the process of change. In this respect, participatory methods for identifying impact pathways offer a prime example of a way to take into account the influence of context on the effects of actions deemed transformative (Chapter 20).

Second, the outcomes of actions in complex systems, like food systems, are uncertain (Morin, 1990). These actions are subject to unpredictable events (climatic, political, economic, health related, linked to technological changes etc.), which raise uncertainty regarding their medium- and long-term impacts. Action must therefore be guided by a strategic and targeted approach rather than a rigid plan for a transition whose outcome cannot really be predicted. This allows for making tactical adjustments to initiatives in response to unexpected events and/or to capitalize on new opportunities that may arise.

Third, the quest to transform food systems involves charting a course between highly transformative actions and modest successes. Actors involved in change processes could therefore draw inspiration from one of the permaculture principles put forward by Bill Mollison (1988): 'the extent of the change (to be made) should be inversely proportional to the effect it will have on the system' (Mollison, 1988). This means prioritizing actions that produce transformative effects that are greater than the effort (or investment) required for their implementation. However, to fuel commitment, quick wins achieved through actions that mobilize actors more easily should not be overlooked. Some changes, though not very transformative, may still serve to highlight what is possible and, because they are meaningful, may have substantial galvanizing potential. 'Bricolages' (makeshift arrangements) and tactics (de Certeau, 1984), or even small daily steps, can trigger dynamics of change, provided their proponents view them as stages in a transformative process and not as an actual end goal.

Finally, the transformation of industrialized food systems may also be hampered by the fact that their different sociotechnical dimensions are tightly

intermeshed. This includes the food system actors, institutions and policymakers whose interests are closely interlinked – agricultural markets and organizations, rural and urban planning, health safety, scientific research, industrial development and other sectors (IPES-Food, 2015; De Schutter, 2017). It is difficult to transform one component of the system independently of the others, and, likewise, it is futile for a single actor to seek to transform all of these components simultaneously. The transformation of food systems therefore cannot be achieved simply through the cumulative action of isolated stakeholders. Instead, it requires a coordinated combination of diverse forms of commitment at different levels (Part 5). All food system actors – activist movements, civil society, local authorities, the conventional private sector and related social actors – have complementary roles to play. The challenge for these actors is therefore twofold: to make change happen at their own level, 'where they are', and to articulate their strengths with those of others by getting to know their allies so as to flip the balance of power that is significantly hampering efforts to overcome deadlocks within food systems (IPES-Food, 2015).

## Stepping into the arena of power struggles

The magnitude of the social and environmental crisis we face today is prompting a change in the very nature of commitment. It is no longer just a matter of informing policymakers or experimenting with alternatives but also of engaging in power struggles with actors who are highly resistant to change. Certainly, the first step in ensuring that environmental and social issues are taken into account in public policies and corporate strategies is to raise awareness. One aspect of this task is indeed to inform decision-makers about the deteriorating situation, to convince them of the seriousness of the risks and to show that alternatives are possible. Scientists and civil society movements have been doing this for several decades, sounding the alarm about the potential impacts of climate change, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), livestock farming conditions and so on.

Informed opposition to the much-needed changes has, however, become apparent since the 1980s (Rowell, 1996). In recent years, Donald Trump in the United States and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil – to name but two of the most glaring examples – supported by part of the electorate and economic powerhouses in their countries, withdrew from international agreements designed to bring about a food system transformation. They implemented policies that went against the recommendations of scientists and environmental movements. In so doing, they revealed that the challenge is no longer simply to inform, raise awareness and convince but also to engage in power struggles and form political alliances to

counter efforts to maintain the status quo. Bruno Latour has proposed what he calls 'compositionism': a political, scientific and aesthetic programme to spark a diplomatic effort to distribute, redistribute and reset 'agencies'. His starting point is that a common world does not exist; everywhere there are multiple ways of doing things, thinking and believing. Within the context of ensuring the sustainability of food systems, this points to the need to reset agencies so as to empower those defending social and ecological co-viability.

Engaging in these power struggles also requires understanding the functioning of the 'systems of actors' involved, investigating the power plays at stake from a political economy perspective. Food systems at all levels are marked by power disparities between actors (often linked to economic inequalities) that influence the governance of these systems and the ways in which food issues are framed. Some powerful actors are able to steer debates, as was the case, for instance, in France within the framework of the États généraux de l'alimentation (French national food conference) or at European level as part of the series of negotiations on the Common Agricultural Policy (Corporate Europe Observatory, 2020). These actors may also seek to disseminate a narrow interpretation of certain food issues, often with a view to legitimizing a vested financial or political interest. This is to some extent the case with regard to food safety (Chapter 11), food fortification practices (Chapter 12) and plant protein consumption (Chapter 13).

## Conclusion

Food ecology calls for a commitment to foster a new relationship with the world. Food is an inherently political issue, and the way we organize it defines the world in which we live and the one we want. This commitment, underpinned by individual and collective enthusiasm, should be tailored to specific contexts. It must also be understood as being multifaceted, shaped by external forces and unpredictable over the long term. Taking action is highly complex and also involves engaging in power struggles with actors resisting the changes needed. Tangible examples of different forms of commitment are discussed in Part 5, which analyses the modalities of engagement available to citizens (Chapters 18 and 19), businesses (Chapter 20), academia (Chapter 21) and public authorities (Chapter 22).

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