

Local food: a concrete Utopia

Christian Deverre and Jean-Baptiste Traversac

Roland Vidal, in his article in Métropolitiques, invited us to look beyond short food-supply chains and rethink local links between cities and agriculture. Here, Christian Deverre and Jean-Baptiste Traversac provide a critical reading of the consequences of changes in farming production methods on the environment and the population.

In an article published in 2011 in *Métropolitiques*,¹ Roland Vidal denounced both the lack of realism of proposals to feed major urban centres via local agriculture and the erroneous nature of assertions that proximity is more environmentally friendly because less energy is used for transport. He invited city-dwellers, instead of dreaming about the re-creation of a market-garden belt that has been logically absorbed by urban growth, to refocus their gaze on the landscape of food crops that remain. His reminder that the disappearance of local agriculture in the inner Paris suburbs is linked to inevitable market forces such as rising land values is obvious. But Roland Vidal fails to consider the significant changes to food systems that go hand in hand with this eviction, and the consequences of these changes, which extend far beyond the inner suburbs.

Indeed, the process of urban sprawl, and the resultant disappearance of most of the surrounding farmland, has accelerated, while the food system has experienced very significant changes, such as the regional specialisation of agricultural production, the development of processing industries and the densification of distribution infrastructures. These concomitant processes were long hailed as “progress”, since the supply of cities appeared to be practically guaranteed by the “modernisation” of agriculture. In this context, it seems more than ever necessary to re-establish the link between local agriculture and urban food culture. This objective is not a “vain Utopia” (as described in the article by André Fleury and Roland Vidal 2010); rather, it is what might be called a “concrete Utopia” – in other words, a realistic, achievable Utopia.

Food issues back on the table

In the last 20 years, we have seen food and agricultural issues make a comeback on the agenda of citizen concerns. Since the 1960s, the “quiet revolution” in farming in France, and the “green revolution” elsewhere, have largely fulfilled their promises to eliminate the spectre of food shortages. The development of logistics and transport systems has made it possible to supply booming metropolises from ever greater distances, while also increasing the amount of choice available. In the 1970s and 1980s, the issue of food made way for agricultural issues, notably with the debate on how to deal with opulence that had turned into surpluses that were not only very costly financially, but also unmanageable from an ethical standpoint.

And then came the health crises, which reached their peak with the “mad cow” episode, followed by countless concerns about the environmental and social consequences of “agricultural

¹ Roland Vidal, “Entre ville et agriculture, une proximité à reconstruire”, *Métropolitiques*, 18 April 2011. URL: <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/Entre-ville-et-agriculture-une.html>.

productivism” – all of which helped to undermine confidence in the system. Among these concerns were pollution by nitrates and pesticides, organic material exports with growing impacts on land-based and aquatic environments, not to mention prices so volatile as to cause lurches between agricultural abandonment and food riots, or the controversies created by the chimeras that are GM foods and animal cloning, calling into question the future of living things and the social control that can be exerted over the technological excesses of chemical and pharmaceutical multinationals. The proliferation of health inspection agencies, the development of cautious agri-environmental policies, the imposition of “best practice” standards within the food industry – subsequently extended to farmers by supermarket chains – and promises of international price regulation were not, however, sufficient to ward off criticism. Numerous citizen initiatives have emerged, decrying junk food, environmental mismanagement and the destruction of the link between town and country. These initiatives aim to develop alternatives to a global food system that is increasingly opaque and uncertain, and put the issue of food quality at the heart of citizens’ concerns.

Proximity: the key to alternative food-supply systems

The desire for “proximity” forms the basis of a number of alternative food-supply systems, alongside models that seek to improve global supply chains through fair-trade and green operations (Morgan 2010). Geographical proximity is combined with social proximity, creating direct contacts between producers and consumers and making it possible to re-establish confidence in the production conditions of the food we eat, while at the same time highlighting the efforts of farmers (green belts, water catchment protection, anti-erosion measures, etc.). Farmers’ markets, farm-gate and online sales, veg-box schemes (run in France by “AMAPs” – associations for the maintenance of small-scale farming) and “traditional” farmers and greengrocers are reappearing or growing in number. Local authorities are also taking part in this movement by incorporating organic and local production into the supply criteria for their mass catering operations, or by supporting promotional activities. These initiatives are, on the whole, viewed positively, even if, in our opinion, they often resemble local marketing operations rather than support for alternative forms of agricultural development. In this context, it would seem necessary to analyse in greater detail the influence of forms of agricultural production and of food-supply systems on the diets of city-dwellers.

First, let us consider the fruit and vegetables that used to be produced in the Paris region by market gardeners in the immediate environs of the city (Phlipponneau 1956), or even in the city itself, and the way in which this produce determined to a large extent the structure and rhythm of what Parisians ate and when they ate it. For example, button mushrooms (known in France as “Paris mushrooms”) and cress were key elements of the Parisian diet. The city lived and ate in time with the harvests of local orchards – which were very often in close proximity to dense city housing, as was the case with the espaliered apples and pears grown in Montreuil (immediately to the east of the city of Paris) – and its inhabitants would eagerly await the arrival of cherries from Montmorency (in the northern suburbs) or Chasselas grapes from Thomery (in the south-western suburbs). The produce brought by these market gardeners to the city’s markets had a major impact on the content of Parisians’ plates.

The outer suburbs of Paris, today a hotchpotch of housing estates and endless arable fields, played a similar role in terms of meat and dairy production: dairy herds were a very common sight, ensuring a supply of milk, butter, cheese (Brie, from Meaux and Provins, and Coulommiers are typically Parisian cheeses) and meat (particularly the marbled meat of cull cows so beloved of Parisians and so unlike the leaner Charolais beef preferred in Lyon) to the capital. The vast arable landscapes that are looked upon fondly by figures such as Roland Vidal have become spaces free of prairies and free of livestock, whose absence has had unexpected consequences. In particular, it is an obstacle to the development of organic crop production, as it means that organic manure has to be imported from far away. Furthermore, only a small proportion of conventional arable crops,

grown using mineral fertilisers, ends up as food for humans, the rest being used to supply intensive livestock farming and the green chemistry industry, based on “agro-materials”.

The “locavore” Utopia becomes a reality

This evocation of the symbiosis between local farming and food culture² that existed for Parisians of the 1950s should serve as a reminder that the “locavore” Utopia (whereby everyone eats food produced locally) is contingent upon a trio of factors: geographical proximity, of course, but also agricultural practices that are adapted to the natural conditions of the area concerned and, above all, specific means of linking spheres of production to spheres of consumption. It should be noted that such means have specific characteristics based on mutual knowledge and acquaintance – a vector of confidence – and the regional distinctiveness and seasonality of ingredients. To this extent, it is not a Utopia in the original sense used by Thomas More (1516) – i.e. a “placeless” social organisation model – but is instead a Utopia rooted in a particular agroecosystem that brings together natural and socio-historic environments. This type of configuration does not, therefore, lend itself easily to evaluation in terms of indicators such as greenhouse-gas emissions. The benefits that it promises call for an all-encompassing assessment, including aspects of social well-being,³ particularly the production of non-commercial goods, i.e. the well-being obtained from accomplishment, the quality of social relations, etc.

Of course, in the immediate future, no one is seriously envisaging defining the boundaries of a “food zone” around Paris within which all the food needs of the metropolis could be met, using only local produce. The reason for this is the inability both of locavore activists and of local and national public authorities to define a programme likely to profoundly change the mode of agriculture in the Paris basin, instead of merely talking about change. Moreover, “the Marco Polo exception” (whereby everyday products that cannot be grown locally, of the kind discovered by European explorers – such as spices – are exempted from local food zones) would have to be extended to products from other culinary cultures that are used by immigrant and native populations. These limitations should not, however, impede the critical process of reincorporating food into the multifaceted debate on what it means to live in an “urban” environment.

Our intention here is not to deny the need to consider alternative food systems with a critical eye. Such systems are faced with many problems: irresolvable land issues, difficulties in accessing the most disadvantaged urban populations and the logistical constraints presented by the outer suburbs. But we have also sought to offer a perspective that questions the consequences of the massive transformation of the food industry with regard to models of urban growth and development, the political choices of the farming lobbies and the domination of major industrial groups. William Cronon (1991) considered that this transformation created a “second nature” – a nature of milk in cartons and square steaks; a nature where the product of work with and on living things metamorphoses into goods without provenance or history, except for the physical and chemical properties that ensure they can be ingested. The far-reaching and radical ways in which physical environments and food systems have mutated mean that it is not possible to envisage a coherent agenda for the future of natural spaces in and around cities. The abundance of initiatives from local authorities and their desire to structure debate on these themes within dedicated networks, such as Terres en Villes or Purple, gives hope for advances in this domain, even if the approaches adopted so far have had only a limited impact, on the outer edges of our plates.

² What Jack Kloppenburg *et al.* (1996) termed the “foodshed”, by analogy with the North American definition of the word “watershed”, meaning the catchment area of a river.

³ See the article published in *Metropolitiques* on the different aspects of well-being (Bourdeau-Lepage & Tovar 2011). URL: <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/Well-being-in-the-Paris-region.html>.

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