

## Food as Common and Community

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Food is a fundamental human right because it is the basis of the most important of all rights, the right to life to which all other rights depend.

The right to eat itself, however, has a long history of being denied, which has run in parallel with the history of the denial of the right to land. The most recent period of this history runs from the drastic structural adjustments of the eighties to the maturing of neoliberal globalisation which has been taking place from the nineties on.

It is thus not by chance that the emergence and grassroots organisation of the various collective subjects protagonists in the movements of the seventies and then in the hard struggles for food, land and water in the eighties has given rise to networks which, crossing land and sea, have focussed on the most fundamental question: how to get food. It is as if all the issues regarding development were thrown upside down and the debate about them landed with its feet firmly planted on the ground: there is no sense in talking about anything else unless one first talks about how people can feed themselves, unless a solution to the problem of staying alive is found first. The other questions are subordinated to it.

This was also the story of my research. I had a deep sense of rejection, and felt a deep lack of interest in the discourses which were going on around me. I found them profoundly boring if the question of how to get food, still outstanding for ever larger shares of humanity, was still being sidestepped.

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So I began by examining the land and sea routes of those were working towards finding a way to feed themselves, and discovered first of all the struggles and the experiences of self-organisation of native peoples, marginalised population groups, and tribals who are for ever being moved on because they are in the wrong place, somewhere which was the most suitable place for testing the ground to find precious materials, or flooding it to build dams or covering it with concrete to build major roads and ports or, in the case of the sea, plundering it.

This story concerns developed areas too, in ways which are sometimes similar and sometimes different.

What I have found is that food is only regained as a fundamental right in its fullest sense when it is regained as a common. It is regained as a common if, along the way, all its conditions are also regained as commons. This is what is already apparent from the ways in which networks of farmers, fisherpeople, and citizens who are not only consumers organize themselves.

First of all, the networks themselves are communities insofar as they tend to guarantee food to the human community as a common good, as a primary human right, and every link within a network forms a community which is organised in various ways to guarantee such a common good to the population of which it is an expression in the context in which it lives. To reach such a common good, however, the various links in the network need to be connected with the community's defence of other common goods. Otherwise we would only be in the spiral of food as a commodity which is imported, exported, contaminated and for many people difficult or impossible to get hold of. Let's take a look at some of these commons which have to be defended to guarantee full access to food

## I Safeguard of the ecosystem

This is even more important than access to the land. Significant examples of this are the campaigns against the so-called 'blue revolution', that is the industrial-scale shrimp farms which have become notorious in many countries of the South for their destructiveness to traditional integrated systems of farming, fishing and the raising of fish, campaigns which many people have died in. With the arrival of the enormous tanks (2 metres deep and a hectare across) full of shrimps and chemicals, many populations have seen the destruction of the ecosystem which was the means of production and reproduction they depended on for their livelihoods. The damage has

ranged from the destruction of mangrove forests, a precious nursery for many species of fish, to the salination of aquifers leading to a loss of drinking water for people, animals and agriculture, and the chemical pollution of the surrounding area with a deterioration in the water quality of the sea nearby. For many, these shrimp farms have not only meant that they cannot get food because they cannot carry out their traditional farming and fishing activities, and they no longer have a place to live; they have also deprived them of their small trade and thus of the cash income that is an essential supplement to what they produce for their own consumption. These fish farms have destroyed mangrove forests in Ecuador, Bangladesh, Brazil, China, the Philippines, Honduras, Indonesia, Mexico, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam, as well as in India. They have given rise to a great deal of protest, including violent campaigns and clashes. Murders linked to the shrimp industry have been reported in eleven countries. In India this industry has attacked the country's 7,000 kilometres of coastline. The people uprooted by these shrimp farms very rarely have land where they can re-establish their economies. The alternative is the poverty, degradation and hunger of big city slums, with other outcomes, from emigration in inhumane conditions to becoming meat for the traffic in organs and other foul trades.

The situations of many coastal communities which have been hit by the arrival of big industrial trawlers are just as much examples of the crucial importance of the ecosystem. These communities used to make their living from a combination of fishing and farming and are now seeing the sea being depleted, with a heavy reduction of fish stocks and the extinction of many species. In such cases it really isn't enough to demand access to the land or the sea, while they are being devastated. To tackle this primary problem, the reestablishment of the ecosystem as a common, since it is a fundamental good, because without it a community would not be able to feed itself and survive, networks of fisherpeople, farmers, citizens and human rights activists have been formed in the Philippines, India, Canada, Senegal and Central America. For example, in the Philippines the Agri-Aqua association, whose name itself shows its wish to respect the balance between farming and traditional fishing, re-establishing it where it has been upset, has succeeded in restoring the mangrove forest and at the same time bringing back the bird species which had disappeared when the trees were destroyed, and they even built an artificial coral reef. It has rebuilt the basis from which to start again as a preliminary to re-establishing an economy which the community is familiar with and wants to preserve.

Comparable issues are found in many other cases, from that of the people evacuated to make way for the great dams in India, of which the Narmada dam is among the best known, to that of the people living along the banks of the Mun river, a tributary of the Mekong, who, again because of a dam, have experienced the loss of a way of getting food which they often did not even have to pay for.

But I have emphasised the examples of coastal communities hit by shrimp farms and industrial trawling carried out by major companies, because thanks to the strength of the fisherpeople movement which, from the seventies on, has grown in various countries and then formed itself into a worldwide forum, the defence of the ecosystem, from the maintenance of the specific character of the coastline to the abundance of fish in the sea, has been a priority, a primary common good which is defended not only because it represents a reliable source of nutrition, but also an economy and a way of life which people do not want to abandon, first and foremost because it puts them in control of their own living conditions.

## II Access to the Land

The second common good is that of **access to the land** and, of course, to the sea for communities that live near it. Access to the land is a much-debated theme. The Via Campesina network of networks, in which farmers' associations from the North and the South from the Karnataka Farmers' Union to Confederation Paysanne to the National Family Farm Coalition has developed this theme in relation to a variety of situations: communal or private systems of land tenure asserting women's right to land ownership where this is denied them, and the possibility of working the land organically to get all the varieties that that land can offer from it. These demands are brought together under the network's banner of "Food Sovereignty". So this is about people's right to produce their own food, the right to a variety of foods rather than having standardized, highly-processed foods imposed on them, the product of the industrial concept of food production and of the specialisation by geographical areas in the neo-liberal globalization of the markets. In this way freedom of enjoying a variety food is the other side of food democracy, which is itself an unavoidable base of a different type of development. If anything it should be emphasised that in countries such as Italy it is difficult for those who want to farm, perhaps organically, to get access to land because of the very high prices which are increased because of the presence of industry, tourism and important motorways. Because of this there are only a few

areas (in the South and on the side of the Apennines overlooking the Adriatic) where land can have a price that is amortizable within the farming process. Then there are the other obstacles that get in the way of agricultural work for a fair level of income comparable with that of other works. As a consequence, in Italy a farm is closing down every half hour. Because of this getting access to the land, farming in a healthy way, earning a fair income from it, establishing relations with other farmers from the point of view that the countryside should create not a few but many jobs, as José Bové has stated, is a rather complicated undertaking, for which it is significant that farmers' networks have been set up that are completely in tune with those of farmers in the South of the world. Notably, *Foro-Contadino – Altragricoltura* which has backed land squats has launched an "Appeal for the Right to Land" and organized a "Farmers' Aid" and a "National Farmers Coordination for the Right to Land". In its appeal it states: "More of all other difficulties a problem that Italy seemed to have shelved with the victories of the farmers struggles of the last century has become very serious again and is more and more dramatically urgent: the denial of access to the land for those who want to work on it due to the very high cost of agricultural land which is linked ever more closely to speculation and less to the real agricultural value..."

### III Healthiness, Freshness, and Quality

The third common good is made up of three elements: healthiness, freshness and quality. This means a refusal of an agriculture that is the product of chemistry and more recently of genetic modification. The deceits of the green revolution and its products to make agriculture more productive have meant that many farmers and other citizens have become ill and are continuing to get ill. To give just one example, xenoestrogens, that is toxic estrogens linked with pesticides, are believed to be causing serious gynaecological disorders and to be a factor in the reduction of male fertility. Thousands of Indian farmers taken in by GMOs have committed suicide. The movement for an alternative agriculture has undertaken various initiatives against foods which increasingly bring death and disease rather than life and health. It has rejected the industrial view of nature which sees the land, plants and animals as things to be treated like machines and therefore it has rejected productivism, that is the false productivity forced out of nature by means of chemicals or genetic modification and which intentionally fails to calculate other economic costs, let alone social and environmental costs. As a consequence, in this context there is a

range of initiatives going from reintroducing *indigenous and natural seeds* against the hybrids which farmers' networks are already engaged in (from the Karnataka Farmers Union to the Columbian peasants' unions to Seed Savers and other associations in various countries including Italy), to the experiences of *saving species which have fallen into disuse and re-establishing traditional methods of cultivation and cooking* which are today being kept alive because of the initiatives of men and women of both the third and first worlds. Indeed, speaking of this, in the first world today there is a notable reawakening of interest and promotional activities on the part of various sectors of society. Other initiatives in advanced countries are those aimed at guaranteeing that small agricultural producers can sell their produce directly in city markets without going through expensive intermediaries, as they have succeeded in doing in the United States or, as it has happened on other cases, in places that people have arranged themselves to meet the needs of customers with economic difficulties. At the same time complaints and protests against the various types of food adulteration which have if anything multiplied with the processes of outsourcing/offshoring and importation. For example, and this is just one example among thousands, the outsourcing of chicken production from Italy to Brazil, with greatly reduced hygiene and health safeguards, chickens which are then sent back to Italy to be served on the tables of those who are poorest in money or time. Against that picture, in the name of a more real possibility of knowing and making known the food production cycle and better preserving its variety and specificity, consumers and producers have become more favourable to and interested in short cycle production systems, where food is distributed locally, as opposed to long cycle production systems which are, of course, still what match the interests of big business. There are even types of vegetable which cannot be transported at all. Only short cycle production can keep them alive. Within the alternative agriculture movement as a whole, there are also initiatives to maintain agricultural production even in difficult places, such as in mountainous areas. When the alternative agriculture movement promotes the short cycle, it is thus also safeguarding various fundamental common goods: biodiversity, freshness, healthiness, quality, the knowability of the production cycle.

#### IV Actual Transparency and Traceability

The fourth common good is the actual transparency and traceability of the production process. The short cycle is already a good start in terms

of verification of the process, including verification by the consumer. The movement has, however, already generated unusual actions to do with this and a series of innovative proposals. Among the most successful actions was one in Monopoli, near Bari in South-Eastern Italy, against the olive oil fraud because of which some brands had been sold for inexplicably low prices on the Italian market for many years. In reality the olive oil was often mixed with other oils, or even replaced by them, highly manipulated to give colour and flavour, and at best made using olives imported from various countries. Since the law permitted the place where the "last substantial transformation", that is the transformation into oil, to be considered to be the place of origin, rather than the place where the olives had been harvested, it was in fact easy to sell all sorts of things as Italian olive oil. New legislation requires the indication of the place where the olives come from. Apart from this case, though, which is striking just because this is such a crucial product for Italian agriculture, there have been other initiatives related to the deeply felt need to be able to verify the production process which it is worth noting. First and foremost De.co, that is a denomination of origin made by the local council. This initiative is working alongside the very few products which have a denomination of origin, such as Doc, Dop, which, however, are often subject to an increase in price which makes them elite products because of such denominations. It is showing the new powers of local councils and thus the possibility of declaring the origin of a product by means of a specific but simple procedure. This provision, which has already been adopted by various councils, makes it possible to enhance the value of a product, give certainty about its origin and production, increase appreciation of the area and promote employment without falling into a surge in price which would make it a luxury product. At the same time a completely voluntary register of producers has been proposed, in which producers self-certify their product, describing its history, cultivation and characteristics and above all creating a relation with the person who buys it which goes beyond the limits of bureaucracy. Another initiative is that of the "farm-gate" price, of course only for those producers who agree to adopt it, that is the indication on the label of the price at which the product is sold by the primary producer, for example the farmer. This answers the need for price transparency. It makes it possible to recognise the exorbitant increases which are often introduced when the product is processed or marketed.

## V The New Ethics

The fifth common good is the new ethics. In the alternative agriculture movement in its broadest sense there is an explosion in the call for alternative relations both from the producer's and the consumer's side (among others) precisely because of the new relationship which they are hoping to establish for food production and distribution. As a consequence, new networks have also been established in the field of distribution. In Italy mutual buying groups (Gas, Gruppi di acquisto solidale) have taken hold. The two million people involved have given themselves five basic rules:

- respect for human beings, that is the products that are bought must not be the products of social injustice but must rather contribute to a socially sustainable society;
- respect for the environment, that is the choice of products obtained with a respect for nature which have also been transported as little as possible;
- respect for the health that stems from the choice of organic products;
- solidarity, that is choosing to buy from small producers who would otherwise be crushed by bigger ones;
- respect for taste, since organic food is well known for having a better flavour as well as a higher nutritional value, in the context of getting closer to the natural rhythms of life by eating only foods that are in season.

What is significant is the emerging of new ethics which affects economic, social and environmental factors. Here too, there is a will to reject the procedures of a development that is becoming more and more unsustainable, a will to establish other relationships. In this sense initiatives which, like the "farm gate price" or the denominations of origin made by the local councils guarantee transparency and traceability, increase the value of local production, the value of the area where the goods are actually produced and with it the value of the new relations that spring from it, not only between producers and consumers, but between citizens. As a result, these initiatives make that area a common good which is available not only to local people but to everybody.

To conclude: in both the South and the North there is a growing global movement for food as a common good which will have to embrace a series of commons, including respect for the ecosystem to the re-establishment of its life cycles, the appreciation of the specific



features of various types of territory. Food that will be a bringer of life, health, abundance, and alternative relationships with nature and between people.