For Hunger-proof Cities
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Sustainable Urban Food Systems

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Food Policy for the 21st Century: Can It Be Both Radical and Reasonable?

Tim Lang

Introduction
To understand the complexities of the food system, we must understand the drivers that shape the food economy and create the territory on which food policy operates. We need to map the features of that territory closely. This paper highlights 10 features that seem particularly important today. Some are drivers, some are trends, some are contradictions, but all are key features.

Ten key features of the food-policy landscape

The food-policy crisis
The first feature of food policy to recognize is that it is in some turmoil, almost everywhere. Over the last 200 years, changes in the nature of production have heavily influenced food policy in the developed world. Over the last 20 years, there has been a rising awareness that the nature of food production has been profoundly altered from the field, in factories, on the shelves, and in kitchens. The resulting food-policy crisis is not surprising, and we can detect four areas in which policy and practice are in a particular ferment:

- Public health — Even in rich countries, the quality of diet has a direct impact on people's health (Cannon 1992). However, degenerative diseases, notably heart disease, associated with affluent overconsuming parts of the globe are on the rise in the South. The rate of the occurrence of food poisoning is rising as food systems become more complex. With bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), the possibility of contagious diseases spread through food has reared its head once more (Lang 1998).

- The nature of supply — What I call the new adulteration thesis is that changes in production and distribution, even cooking, have altered the nature of food. Additives, pesticide residues, and genetically engineered foods all testify to changes resulting from the use of science and technology to make food production more “efficient” and profitable. Awareness is now growing that this adulteration of food is associated with, and may even cause, ecological problems.
- **Social justice** — Mass inequity appears in all aspects of the food system, both between and within countries, globally, nationally, and regionally.

- **Consumer demand** — Overconsumption occurs alongside underconsumption; distorted demand, alongside real need; and the rhetoric of consumer sovereignty, alongside consumer confusion and anxiety. Companies that have invested billions are bemused at consumer reactions. This interests me. In most countries of the world, not just the rich ones like Canada, the United Kingdom, or the United States, something very positive is emerging out of the demand for better labeling, information, and knowledge. A shift from consumerism to citizenship is discernible.

**Conflicts in food policy**

A second feature we have to recognize is that food policy cannot be understood as an issue of consensus. It is, and almost always has been, a battleground of competing interests. The well-intentioned model is promoted, for instance, by John Boyd Orr, the Scottish nutritionist who became the first director of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO); under this model, food policy seeks to transfer the fruits of overproduction in one area to alleviate underconsumption elsewhere. This model of justice through global food trade is, I believe, now inappropriate ecologically, socially, and culturally.

However, I detect the beginnings of a reaction, a search to relocalize food production. The trade model is, of course, triumphant economically and ideologically and is promoted through the world food system under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), but conflict is building. What underlies this conflict? We need to recognize that the central driving force in the food economy is the desire to make money out of food. As humans, we may think of food as an issue of need; economically it is a commodity for greed. Those of us who observe and research this process need to build into our analyses the complexity of competing sectoral interests.

In most countries, the food system can only be understood if the different power relations between the various sectors — farmers, processors, traders, retailers, caterers, etc. — are sketched. In most countries, power in agricultural production has shifted from farmers to the agricultural-input industry, from food processors to distributors and food retailers, and from domestic to commercial cooks. Within these shifts, the general rule in post-Fordist economies is that power resides with the sector that mediates between production and consumption. It is a trader's world. The trader is sovereign, although according to the ideology the consumer is in command. However, on some issues, such as safety and ethics, the new citizenship movements referred to earlier are now challenging the power of the trader. Public-health interests are also becoming more active in food policy.

**Implicit and explicit policy**

The third key feature of the food-policy landscape is the difference between implicit and explicit food policies. In wartime, governments almost always have explicit policies. They say, “We want to protect everyone; we want every woman to have her child well fed.” Security of supply is a national responsibility. In peacetime, suddenly it becomes a familial responsibility. A general assumption is that markets will provide. Implicit
food-policy outcomes can be, for example, the growth of ill health or the creation of the new food poor. No one explicitly says they intend the poor to starve. Yet, implicitly, this is the inevitable outcome. The point to note is that explicitly the state takes responsibility under certain circumstances and not under others. The challenge to food activists is to make those explicit benefits available in peacetime. Food policy has consequences, and it is important to draw a distinction between intended policies, such as deregulation and support for industry, and unintended consequences, such as BSE or wildlife damage.

The dynamic of food control versus food democracy

The fourth feature concerns what I call food democracy. I use the expression food democracy to refer to the demand for greater access and collective benefit from the food system. Support for this approach continues to bubble in most parts of the globe, even in rich areas. They too are socially divided. Ultimately, food is both a symptom and a symbol of how we organize ourselves and our societies. It is both a vignette and a microcosm of wider social realities. From the political perspective, it makes sense to see the dynamics of the food system as a titanic struggle between the forces of control and the pressure to democratize. To characterize one set of forces as driven by greed, and the other by need is probably too crude, but it certainly contains an element of truth.

Studying food policy over the years, I have been impressed by how often one can map motivations for sectional interest by whether they promote individualism or collectivism, private or public interest. If the control approach to food policy is associated with pressure from above, in societal terms, food democracy is a set of demands from below. Food democracy, as a force in food policy, is significant because for two centuries, since industrialization and the modern globalization experiment unfolded, there has been counterpressure to provide the means to eat adequately, affordably, safely, humanely, and in ways one considers civil and culturally appropriate.

In every country, the struggle for food democracy appears to ebb and flow. In the United Kingdom, this can be mapped out absolutely clearly. In the mid-19th century (1820-75), the central demand was for quality and affordability, confronting adulteration of food. A struggle also raged over whether farmers should be supported to grow food. By the turn of the century, the food struggle was for food welfare. From the 1890s to the 1950s, services such as school meals and meals-on-wheels were won, which gave a big boost to the social wage. Today, after two decades of retreat and restructuring of welfare (cutbacks, removing nutrition standards from school meals, tightening up on eligibility for welfare, etc.), pressure is once more building up from below to ensure that food is fit to eat, that the poor are not disenfranchised by the rise of supermarkets and the destruction of locally accessible stores, that food is affordable, etc. The point is that we can only make sense of what happens in food policy if we see it as the result of social forces competing for influence and power. Food policy, like all public policy, has to be situated historically.

Uncertainty in the food system

The fifth feature, one that is particularly interesting at present, is the uncertainty of the food economy. Although powerful forces seek to control the food system, key uncertainties loom ahead. These uncertainties include issues such as climate change,
population pressures, consumerism, the internal conflicts of market forces, and inequalities driven by globalization and the restructuring of welfare. Rising population is a subject much researched and now used by genetic engineers to rationalize their developments. Population is an issue, but what this means and how it is interpreted varies enormously. When analyzing countries such as China, we note that its rapid rise in disposable income is allowing rising aspirations (why not?) and increased meat eating. This is going to transform China's and possibly the world's agriculture. Some US farmers see the future of intensive (Western) agriculture as providing feedstuffs to fuel China's animal production. This may be good news for North American grain producers, but is it ecologically sound? Climate change is another threat to food systems. What if the sea rises? What cropping changes will happen? Another uncertainty is in business. An extraordinary wave of mergers and acquisitions has emerged globally. Sometimes I think that large companies seem more concerned to eat each other than to feed the world. The merging of large companies that dominate the marketplace threatens to saturate national as well as international markets. Competition policy, which currently exists in some countries at the national level, is powerless or nonexistent internationally.

The limits of consumer sovereignty

The sixth feature concerns consumer sovereignty. As I have already hinted, I think this is one of the great myths of food policy in the late-20th century, indeed, of neoliberal ideology. Consumers are far from sovereign. If they were, why is there hunger or food poisoning? In *The Unmanageable Consumer* (Gabriel and Lang 1995), Yiannis Gabriel and I argued that it is misleading to talk of "the consumer." Consumers come in millions of forms, broken down and divided by class, income, family, gender, taste, lifestyle, sexual orientation, aspirations, etc. Consumers are highly diverse, even though the consumer movement would like them not to be. In food tastes, rich consumers in diverse countries may be more similar than consumers within the same country. In our book, we tried to tease out various core models of what it is to consume according to Western ideology. We found that, far from being homogeneous, they are collectively confused and often contradictory. Nongovernmental organizations, for instance, tend to appeal to consumers as victims, activists, citizens, or possibly identity seekers. "Look at the latest scam being foisted on you," they say; or "Consume wisely, using our notion of value for money, and you will be better off and more contented."

The food industry approaches consumers as choosers, communicators, explorers, and hedonists. It appeals to a positive notion of ourselves, the people we would like to be. Environmentalists, health educators, etc., too often appeal to us in negative terms. "Don't do this or that." "Be fearful." The complex set of meanings of consumption is not just a feature of the modern world. It has been recognized, for instance, in the cooperative movement, from the mid-19th century on. The proponents of the cooperative movement argued that only by controlling the system of food production can consumers have confidence in both quality and price. This movement was a powerful corrective on the worst excesses of the food sector of the day, and its impact rolls on still, having inspired many consumer organizations over the years. (We forget our food-policy history at our intellectual peril. We are constantly reinventing the wheel, when in fact others have dealt with a problem very elegantly before us.)
The nature of production and distribution

The seventh feature has, again, already surfaced but has to be restated as a key feature of contemporary food policy in its own right. Food policy is increasingly concerned not just about what we eat or whether we eat but also about how food is produced. Arguments about food's impact on health, the environment, social justice, or welfare all lead us to the conclusion that the nature of production and consumption, even how we cook, has altered. We will have difficulty understanding the failure of attempts to achieve food security and food democracy or to appreciate how intensive food production has an impact on health and the environment if we don't recognize that the challenge is about the nature of production. In food policy, too often progressive social forces, such as the proponents of ecological agriculture or the new public-health movements, fail to see that their concerns have a common theme — the need to change methods of production and control throughout the food chain. Failure to see this weakens the impact that they could, if allied, have on food policy. An illustration of the impact a common cause can have is the debate over the introduction of genetically engineered products.

Rethinking the role of the state

The eighth key feature of the food-policy landscape is that (although it is unfashionable to stress this) a central role is needed for state action in food policy. A limit attaches to how much improvement ("food democracy" in my terms) can come from individual action. Although the rhetoric of late capitalism focuses on individual consumer action and responsibility, in practice the food system is so concentrated that individuals are relatively powerless. A rethinking of the state's role in food is long overdue. The Americanization of public policy tends to celebrate the virtues of the hands-off state. The European tradition is worth noting. In Europe, citizens, from the French Revolution to the present, have argued that the state has to express the collective will. In food, the state regulated production, set standards for food adulteration and contamination, and intervened in the workings of the marketplace. This state role has been whittled away in recent decades to such a point that the notion of "reinventing" the state is a misnomer for its privatization and evisceration.

Looking ahead at food-policy challenges, I see no alternative to a thoughtful role for a state that can mediate between individual and collective wills. Only a benign state, democratically accountable, can tame the worst excesses of increasingly powerful corporations in the food sector. In fact, by accepting the argument that we should not turn to the state for the general good, but seek it in markets, we actually allow corporate interests to penetrate and dominate what the state does. We see this most blatantly in the regulatory process in which corporate interests have infused the supposedly neutral state discourse in setting standards. This is now happening at the global level through bodies such as Codex Alimentarius Commission, which the representatives of big companies excessively influence. In short, as researchers and involved people, we need to get more sophisticated about the state.

The United Kingdom's experience of evolving notions of the role of the state in food might be illuminating. In UK food policy, three phases of state involvement have occurred or will occur in the post-war period:

• The first was interventionism: Boyd Orr was an interventionist in food policy. He saw a benign global state in the FAO; its role was to get surpluses to
places where people suffer deficiency. He left the FAO before long, we should note, discontented about its direction. In the post-war period, a benign Keynesian corporatism introduced regulations and intervened in markets.

- The second phase was the neoliberal counterrevolution, which we have experienced these last two decades. Anti-interventionism, associated with Thatcherism and Reaganism, promoted self-regulation and deregulation. This phase still unfolds. GATT almost makes this mandatory.

- But waiting in the wings is a third phase of state involvement. This heralds a proactive partnership, with the state playing the roles of facilitator, educator, and promoter of efficiencies. It is unclear where this model will go. It could fuse into neoliberalism, or it could signal a new collectivism.

**Centralization**

The ninth feature is centralization, with the policy tensions that follow from it. I have been heavily involved in the UK debate about our government institutions, for reasons suggested just above. Specifically, my colleagues and I have argued for a reform of food governance. Our ministries and committees are out of date, in need of overhaul. Happily, after the 1997 election, we are promised one aspect of what we want, a reform of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, long associated with unnecessarily rigid support for production interests. Involved in this unfolding saga, we conducted a study of seven countries' systems of food governance, in particular their food-control systems. This revealed that the mechanism for food governance, in all of these countries, was in flux. Everywhere food governance was creaking. Agencies were being overhauled, and new ones were being set up. Existing institutions have been losing their public trust. Why? Partly, this is because they have lost sight of the public interest and confused it with corporate efficiency. Partly, government institutions no longer have sufficient control to address the issues raised by globalized corporations or the new, more complex chains of production and distribution. The capacity of government to govern is itself in some doubt. For example, Norway has probably the most progressive food policy anywhere in the developed world. In 1975, it made a proactive policy commitment to keep small-scale farmers on the land and it banned Azo dyes and all food colours — in other words, no adulteration. The argument was partly health, partly environment, and partly small-business-support driven. Norway argued against joining the European Union because of the Common Agricultural Policy. Yet, in 1994, it signed the new GATT. Its government has been under pressure to protect and promote Norwegian agriculture and food; the reality has been that Norway's food policy is hitched to a globalized system. Its food-colouring rules, for example, and its additives policy have been brought into line with the more permissive regime of Codex Alimentarius.

Everywhere, the food economy is centralizing. The top five companies in the world control 77% of the world market in cereals (Cargill more than 60%); in tea the top three control 85% of the world market; the top three in cocoa have 84%; in agrochemicals, the top 10 have 90% of the market. Everywhere, small-scale farmers are being driven off the land, and retailing is dominated by fewer and larger companies. Concentration is occurring not just within countries but across borders, either through takeovers or through strategic alliances.
The environmental challenge

The tenth key feature of the food-policy landscape is the potential threat and, in some areas, the already real threat to sustainability — how to make the food system ecologically feasible. This is the great environmental challenge, in which I see the need for public and environmental analyses to coalesce. The model of production, developed over the last 30–40 years, has had a deeper and deeper ecological footprint; its impact increases by the day. The world now emerging is divided into a variety of consuming classes, and this raises important environmental-health issues and has important public-health implications. In the United Kingdom, my colleagues and I have been conducting research on the impact of shopping. People now travel 50% farther to get their food than they did 15 years ago. Few do their food shopping on foot. They get into a car to go to the supermarket. This has enormous implications. The amount of time people spend shopping has, in fact, gone up, rather than down, over the last 30 years. Shoppers' time comes free, enabling the distribution sector to take greater control over the post-Fordist food economy. Or, to put this notion differently, the cost of consumers' time and their use of cars is not reflected in the price of the food they purchase. The health implication of this change from local to more distant shopping is that people are becoming more obese while making greater use of nonrenewable fossil fuel. Consumers use nonrenewable fossil fuel, instead of using food. The restructuring of the food economy is thus playing its part in the alarming rise of obesity in most developed — that is, car-based — economies. We are not burning off the foods, yet we are obsessed about being thin. A mass psychological schizophrenia is entrenched within and by food culture.

The supposedly efficient globalizing food system is posing an immense ecological challenge. The rich consumers of the world are increasingly using the world as their larder. Green beans are being flown to UK dinner tables in the middle of winter from Zambia, and this sets Zambia against Tanzania and Tanzania against Kenya to decide which is to have the privilege of feeding us. This is creating a neocolonial relationship. This also leads to the ecological absurdity I have called the "food-miles (or food-kilometres) problem." By food-miles, I refer to the physical distance that foods travel between grower and consumer. It is easier in UK supermarkets to get Spanish asparagus that has come 1 000 km than it is to get asparagus from the Midlands or Worcestershire, in the heart of the United Kingdom. Long-distance food is cheaper, but the energy and environmental costs are externalized: that is, they are not reflected in the retail price. Cheap energy (oil) underpins "cheap" food. The investment plans of the European Union will accelerate this process. Jacques Delors' legacy includes the pan-European Union motorway system, now being put in place (as well as high-speed trains). This is a mixed blessing. For present purposes, I merely suggest how the state investment in transport infrastructure heightens the food-miles problem.

At the same time, European Union governments have signed the European Convention on Biodiversity, to protect biodiversity. This is excellent, but the problem is that the words of biodiversity are not being put into practice in the field, because it is easier and more economical to buy distant food from monocropped lands — where labour, land, and water are cheap — than to support diverse local production. Rich, consuming regions are sucking in foods from other regions. This is grossly unequal. Massive imports come into the European Union, for instance, just to feed animals. This is surely madness.
The ecological footprint of the supposedly efficient West is deeper and wider than it ought to be, because of the power of the trader. The downside of this efficiency is immense. Gradually, a difference between the consumerism of food and the citizenship of food is emerging. We are being encouraged to think of ourselves as consumers (power at the point of sale or purchase), rather than as citizens who have some leverage in the food economy. In this process, I see new opportunities for food's democratic struggle. The issue of skills, for instance, is becoming very important. Is the future one in which people feed themselves or are fed? In the United Kingdom, for instance, a culture of noncooking is emerging. Even if people have cooking skills, are they using them? Food processors are delighted to see a growth in the number of homes in which people have never really cooked, with the result that children's role models don't teach their children to cook. If you think of the evolution of cooking skills over 10 000 years, an immense culinary shift is taking place in mere decades. Schools and the state are colluding in this process, encouraging computer skills but not life skills. This should not be an either-or public policy. The United Kingdom's national curriculum, for instance, removed cooking skills from the classroom. We no longer teach cooking skills to our children. They are taught a theoretical exercise of designing a snack bar, with the emphasis on packaging; thus a practical issue becomes a matter of theoretical culture.

Summary of features of the food-policy landscape
To sum up these 10 features, I see the landscape of food as dominated by contradictory pulls. Two overreaching tendencies are discernible — two policy packages:

- On the one hand, globalization; on the other, pressures for localization;
- On the one hand, long trade routes; on the other, pressures for local, sustainable food systems;
- On the one hand, intensification; on the other, calls for extensification and biodiversity; and
- On the one hand, deskilling; on the other, new skills (managing a microwave!).

But for me, the heart of the policy choice is the issue of consumerism versus citizenship. Unchecked consumerism heralds a diminution of food culture, an erosion of many of the gains in the struggle for social improvement over the last two centuries. Consumerism implies a relationship in the market; citizenship implies a permanent struggle to control markets. One is food control from above and beyond; the other is the constant search for food democracy from below. I identify with the latter, even though my observation and studies lead me to conclude that, at present, we are drifting to the former. My heart and brain are in conflict! Where a few hundred corporations and two regional trading blocks — North America and Europe — dominate food policy, what other intellectual conclusion can be drawn? I'm hopeful, however, that change is coming.

The need for new goals
If we are to achieve food citizenship, I believe we must find new goals. We need to open up the process of setting food policies, globally, regionally, nationally, and locally. If we don't, we will be allowing other corporate identities to dominate and determine the shape of food policy.
In particular, I think we can share the following 10 goals:

- Security of supply for an increasingly urban population;
- Expansion of environmentally sound production methods;
- Access for all to a good-quality, health-enhancing diet;
- Stable employment in the food sectors;
- A reduction of the dietary gap between rich and poor (by giving policy priority to low-income consumers);
- A reduction of national import-export imbalances (what we call, in the United Kingdom, the food “trade gap”) (we should support local food and reduce long-distance trade);
- Support for biodiversity (by encouraging variety in production in the field and transferring this biodiversity from field to the plate);
- The creation of explicit comprehensive food policies, globally, nationally, and locally;
- An emphasis on rebuilding the local food economy, celebrating and enhancing diversity of taste, cuisine, and culture; and
- The creation of strategic alliances and much more international sharing of experiences, not just among academics or within the voluntary sector, but between and across the sectors.

Conclusions

The task ahead is awesome — intellectually, politically, and culturally — but these are exciting times. Unparalleled interest is shown in food issues in both the North and the South. Also, exciting new issues face us from biotechnology to competition policy. For food policy, as ever, the challenge is to move it from a position in which it reacts to events and is driven by the powerful to one in which democratic debate clarifies long-term goals. Our horizons need to be 30–50 years hence. Corporate giants plan this way; we should too.

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