

BOLDIZSÁR MEGYESI

INTRODUCTION

THE SOCIAL MEANING OF FOOD

The third special issue of *socio.hu* aimed at collecting papers discussing the changing role of food in contemporary European society. This collection is a result of the workshop on the Social meaning of food, held between the 16th and 17th of June in Budapest.¹ Our original aim was to open a space for different approaches of rural studies, economics, cultural studies and ecology and to find a common focus for the different approaches. From a certain point of view, this special issue matches our original ideas: there are papers from different social sciences, and the papers also cover different subjects.

This collection includes nine papers from the field of anthropology, ethnography and sociology, and the topics of the papers range from a theoretical analysis of the role of food in our age (Bruckmeier), through the concept of local food in sociology (Cucco–Fonte), as well as several empirical analyses, using anthropological and historical perspectives (Sampeck), to ethnographic methods (Duvnak–Macan). Most of the papers using empirical data give an insight into Eastern-Central European local food studies, as does the article written by Nistor, Asztalos-Morell, Spiewak and Bielewicz, Šikić-Mićanović and that by Csurgó and Megyesi.

The first paper presents a discussion paper on interdisciplinary theoretical framework to renew the philosophical discourse on food. The paper analyses the appearance of food in the history of Western philosophy, as it is the context from which an interdisciplinary food discourse can be unravelled. The analyses supports one of Bruckmeier’s main claims that “the changing conditions of food production and consumption in the epoch of the Anthropocene, are lacking in conventional philosophy. Globalization, industrial food production, and genetic modification of food products require knowledge and ideas from different disciplines, connection and synthesis of knowledge.” The next chapter of the paper presents case studies showing the necessity of an interdisciplinary synthesis of knowledge on food. Finally the author argues for developing an interdisciplinary perspective for the analysis of the transformation of food processes in modernity in a macroscopic cultural perspective. The theoretical paper closes with presenting the next steps of the discussion on the role of interdisciplinary philosophy of food.

The second paper of the collection, written by Ivan Cucco and Maria Fonte has a narrower focus. It analyses “the value of the *local food* concept” by discussing it as a *real utopia*; and using the framework developed by E. O. Wright. The authors argue that local food systems are a critique of the present, and that it can be a prefiguration of a more sustainable, just and democratic future. In the conclusions they state that “by mobilizing non-ruptural strategies in the service of a real utopian project, local food initiatives are opening up

¹ Organised by socio.hu and Institute for Sociology CSS HAS. See *call for papers* at http://socio.hu/uploads/files/CFP_food.pdf, *programme* at http://www.socio.hu/uploads/files/FOOD/food_programme.pdf, *list of participants* at http://www.socio.hu/uploads/files/FOOD/food_participants.pdf, and *abstracts* at http://www.socio.hu/uploads/files/FOOD/abstracts_food.pdf.

new, enlarged spaces for non-capitalist or post-capitalist economies that constitute the basis for social learning and experimentation of a global more sustainable and just food system.” The next step of the research could be to explore the effects of local food movements on the modern food industry – a claim which also appeared in Bruckmeier’s paper, and a claim, rural sociology fails to fulfil. After understanding this connection, we can analyse, whether a “reflexive, more democratic, socially empowering system of governance” is able to lead to a more democratic and more just food system, and society.

The further papers are less theoretical, although do not lack theoretical back-ground and address some of the questions raised by the above two papers.

Martin and Sampeck, using anthropological methods give insight into the history of chocolate: how it appeared in Europe in the times of colonialism, how it served then and how it serves now as a symbol of social inequalities. The detailed analysis of the paper shows how an agricultural product became an industrial-product, and describes how these changes reshape the wider socio-economic environment of the product. It also tries to explore the phenomenon, the role of new food movements (namely Fair Trade) in chocolate consumption. The paper connects industrial conventional food and local – special food, and shows their dynamic relationship with each other and also the effects of food production on social processes using the example of chocolate.

The fourth paper of the collection, by Duvnjak and Macan also uses a historical perspective, but the applied approach is close to the approach used in European rural sociology these days. The authors analyse contemporary Dalmatian cuisine to explore the presence of traditional practices and the effects of modernization. According to their analysis modern or postmodern nourishment had few effects on the cuisine of the selected Dalmatian Islands.

There are two papers in the special issue which analyse how poor families deal with the problem of a lack of food and insufficient nourishment. Šikić-Mićanović finds that feeding is laborious and highly gendered in some Roma families, especially those living in food poverty. She argues that the lack “of access to healthy and nutritious food aggravates health, social, educational, economic and gender inequalities that squarely places them at the bottom rung of the social ladder”. The paper of Asztalos-Morell analyses a social farming initiative, which exactly aims at moderating poverty, and especially the lack of food. Thanks to contemporary policy making, this topic is highly interesting; the article analyses a civic – local governance initiated movement and finds its result quite positive.

The last three papers focus on local food and new food movements, and shows also the social-cultural background of the initiatives.

Bilewicz and Śpiewak use the term Alternative Food Network (AFN) to show how the social background of the members of a new-type consumption cooperative influences the functioning of such initiatives. They argue that the Western-European examples can serve as a model for the new movements, but exactly this may lead to the fact, that the Western-European concepts can be used in the Polish context only cautiously, because these initiatives remained enclaves within Polish society.

Nistor analysed the meaning of local food and argues that there are two major definitions of local food: 1) a place-centred, geographic definition and 2) a production-centred, 'how it is made' kind of definition. Although the author emphasizes that she worked in Romania using qualitative methods, her results can be generalized, and are quite close to the distinction made by EU-legislation on PDO/PGI and traditional foods. The value of the paper is that it gives evidence that "consumers' involvement with local food occurs along product-based aspects, i.e. the intrinsic characteristics of food (taste, ingredients) and local food consumption seems to be much more motivated by health concerns and status assignment than by ethical and ecological reasons".

Csurgó and Megyesi analyse the interconnectedness of local food production, local identity creation and local image-making. The paper is based on two contemporarily discussed phenomena of rural development: local cultural heritage and local food production, as a part of local cultural heritage. Using the examples of three Hungarian rural micro-regions they analyse how a local community presents itself through local food production, and how local communities can be built by revitalizing a part of the local cultural heritage: a local-food product.

A real strength of the special issue is that it shows food production and consumption as a social phenomenon; places the different practices (consumer-producer relations, local food production) in their social context or explicitly address social problems.

Possible further research directions are numerous, but the papers of the special issue present both theoretical and empirical pathways to connect alternative and mainstream food production, and link between modern and postmodern consumption patterns, and thus will bring new knowledge to the topic of the social meaning of food.