Fueling our Food Anxieties

When it comes to food, questions of access, scarcity, or technology seem to further fuel our daily anxieties. Perhaps this generalized feeling of anguish stems in part from the hegemonic vision of sustainability when understood in global terms. Instead of global efficiency, I propose to think of sustainability at a more intimate level. Using the social space of the table as a defining human scale, consumption can be reimagined aesthetically and culturally in terms of ethics and hedonistic frugality.

When we eat, we not only feed our bodies, through the food we choose to eat (or not to eat) we also construct who we are and who we want to be in the world. In fact, food helps us make sense of the world, and who we are is structured in part by what and how we eat, as well as whom we eat with. The symbolic and social connections developed at the table ground us and connect us to others, human and non-human animals, in extremely valuable ways. In the current context of world crisis, I would argue that commensality and generosity at the table can provide urgently needed solutions to sustainability issues. For instance, specific cultural policies ranging from taste education for children to revitalization of scientific research committed to underscore the inclusiveness as well as the federating potential inherent to food practices provide legitimate attempts at culinary democratization and food access.

Coherent politics of conviviality (better living together through eating together) point to the possibilities for innovative, inter-relational connections at the table as well as the need to challenge fixed compartmentalization of knowledge. Very much like this interdisciplinary panel, reaching beyond specific fields or disciplinary perspectives, and integrating a cross-disciplinary approach to food-related issues reveals a much-needed reorganization of knowledge through a sort of transfer of technologies aimed at the collaborative construction of cultural and mutual understanding. French sociologist Alain Caillé encourages precisely this type of ethical social engagement; seeking to end various forms of silencing when folding many critical voices into a universalism he terms pluriversalism.

The fecundity of the concept of conviviality, inherited from classical notions of civility and sociability, relies heavily on aesthetics. It is indeed through evolving aesthetics that ethics enter the realm of knowledge and politics. Too often, the role of aesthetics and artistic cultural productions are either undermined or absent from historical and technological accounts. To me, the aesthetics and politics of food apprehended at the intimate level of the table allow for the exploration of interstitial theoretical spaces within which concepts can then cross-polinate and better illuminate the complexities of our human endeavors.

Critical interdisciplinary investigations can perhaps help us construct less anxiety-driven frameworks toward coherent and more compassionate food politics for the 21st century. The close examination of specific trans-disciplinary vectors not only contributes to the elaboration of inter-relational politics of sociability that reflect the rich diversity of contemporary food cultures, but it also points to the urgent need for us to reimagine food access and democratization as a promising path toward sustainable social reconciliation.

Ph. Dubois