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THE FOOD SYSTEM AS A COMMONS

Giacomo Pettenati, Alessia Toldo and Tomaso Ferrando

Introduction

In the last years, academics and non-academics alike have increasingly been discussing the commons as an old–new framework to engage with the interactions between humans and nature. Despite the multiplicity of communal practices that characterize current food systems all over the world, it has only been recently that the idea of food as a commons has received attention behind the doors of universities and research centres. It took even longer for it to permeate the sphere of public and political debates (Dalla Costa, 2007; Rundgren, 2016; Sumner, 2011; Vivero–Pol 2017a, 2017b).

As demonstrated by several contributions to this edited volume, contemporary endeavours around food and the commons cover a wide range of approaches and visions, but they tend to share a strong critique of the commodification of food as an object of consumption and the desire to challenge the underlying assumptions of excludability, rivalry and exchange value. These authors affirm that food should be removed, like air and water, from market logics and constraints: it must be appreciated through the lens of utility and needs rather than price, profit and consumerism. When there was a plan to privatize water, people occupied streets in Bolivia (Assies, 2003), organized bottom-up movements and binding referendums in Italy (Fantini, 2012; Mattei, 2013) and manifested their dissent in India, the United States and several other places in the world. However, the number of those who question the fact that access to food is mainly dependent on economic transactions or, in fewer cases, on the consumers' possibility of accessing land and farming for self-consumption, is still limited. Luckily, the landscape seems to be changing both at the national and international level. This chapter aims to contribute to the strengthening of this raising tide.

The shift in paradigm is taking place through different forms and at different levels. In the legal framework, for example, Stefano Rodotà (2012) highlighted that the diffusion of a de-commodified vision had been increasingly consolidating through “the legal recognition of new words that are criss-crossing the world: free software, no copyright, free access to water, *food*, medicines, internet, and of the fact that these forms of access assume the form and strength of fundamental rights.” In his words, this is proved by the fact that “[t]he United Nations General Assembly [...] recognized everyone’s right to adequate food” (Rodotà, 2012, p. 316)¹ and therefore attributed international legal status to access to food as an intrinsic requirement of humanity.

In the areas of food studies, urban food planning and local food policies (Morgan, 2009; 2013), the holistic approach of the commons has been utilized to criticize a fragmented understanding of food and to support the idea of systemically engaging with all the dimensions of food, which, by its own nature cannot be reduced to its economic representation only. More generally, the commodification of food has been recognized by different authors as one of the causes of the structural fallibility of the corporate food system (Russi and Ferrando, 2015; Vivero-Pol, 2017a), the social injustices that are associated with transnational food chains (Pothukuchi and Kaufman 1999; Power 1999) and food insecurity (Friedmann 1993).

Following on from some of the experiences mentioned above, this chapter combines our different backgrounds as planners, geographers and lawyers to highlight the importance of a paradigmatic and political shift from commodity to commons and to go beyond the 'sole' redefinition of the understanding, practice and role of food. The real intellectual and practical step forward, we believe, is to use de-commodifying power of the commons to redefine (i.e. subvert) the entirety of the food system and thus help rewrite and reconsider each element that make food possible. In our eyes, food cannot be dissociated from the broader series of socio-economic interactions that lie behind it. Marx clearly affirmed that the wage hides all the unpaid work that goes into profit (Cox and Federici, 1975). Similarly, we believe that a critical de-commodification of food and its transition into a commons must approach food as the outcome and generator of contingent and dynamic socio-spatial relationships, most of which are hidden behind the final price and the act of consumption. In simpler terms, we think that it is not possible (or accurate) to aim 'only' to the vision of food as a commons, but that a radical and ecological transformation of our understanding of food must pass through thinking, performing and engaging with the whole food system as a commons. As recently discussed by Holt-Giménez (2017), we agree that what really matters is not food as the final moment of a complex system of capital, labor, land and water, but the relationships within the food system, and the way we govern them.

In order to present the alternative and formulate some suggestions, we have decided to adopt a horizontal and vertical approach to the topic, dividing the chapter as follows. The first part briefly introduces the concept of food systems and focuses on the different components that may be individually conceived as commons and the way in which de-commodification may be exercised. This is what Laura Nader (1980) would call a vertical slice, i.e. an engagement with the other commons that are mobilized (and often appropriated) underneath food as a commons. The second part of the chapter shifts from elements to phases, adopting a horizontal perspective that connects the different dots of a simplified food chain. However, rather than describing their functioning, we offer some preliminary thoughts on what it would mean to relate them to the paradigm of the commons. The third section engages with practices (Alternative Food Networks) and food policies (Urban Food Strategies) that in our opinion could represent privileged platforms to conceive, implement and consolidate the idea of food systems as a commons. In the Conclusions, along with an invitation to further dialog and debate, we step into the consumers' shoes and offer some reflections on the role that they could have in constructing and practicing the food system as a commons.

Before we continue, two caveats are needed, which we hope the reader will overcome through the combination of the other contributions contained in this volume. Firstly, we decided to be selective and to pick only a few of the elements that intervene in the definition of the complexity of the food system. We refer to the other authors in this volume for a broader and deeper analysis of some of them, such as seeds, agricultural knowledge, the cultural aspects of food, etc. Secondly, we are conscious that our attempt to think about the food system as a commons may lead to some questions about scalability and potential to satisfy the nutritional

needs of the whole population. To this set of questions, we can only reply by mentioning that “the significance of smallholder agriculture is not limited to a subgroup of low-income countries” but, rather, “smallholder[s] play a role in the EU, OECD countries, and in developing countries, including Brazil, India, China that have reached ‘middle income’ status in the past 15–20 years” (HLPE, 2013: 28). If small-scale farmers and the food that they produce are the reason why there is food on the planet, communing and scaling up shall be easier than imagined.

Food system made of multiple commons

Pothukuchi and Kaufman (1999) define a food system as the combination of all the activities connected to production, transformation, distribution, consumption and post-consumption of food. In addition, their analysis incorporates all the institutions and the regulatory activities that link to these phases. Like food as a final output, which is composed of a multiplicity of different elements, the food system is the dynamic and heterogeneous ensemble of ‘organic’ and ‘inorganic’ elements, ‘social’ and ‘natural’ constructions (Murdoch et al., 2000), ‘material’ and ‘immaterial’ building blocks. Rather than a coherent and uniform space, the food system is a complex *assemblage* of people, resources, places, interactions, relationships, practices and politics. This is even more the case if we think that, despite production being local by definition, the distance between consumers and producers is progressively increasing, the food chain is exponentially the object of desire of transnational financial speculators, and few gatekeepers operate in positions of quasi-monopoly when it comes to connecting land to fork.

It is there, where the territory of food production meets the transnationalism of trade, ‘consumption’ and ‘post-consumption’, that we realize that the *communio* of food at the end of the chain cannot be considered enough. There can be no food as a commons when the rest of the network is still organized and assembled around the commodification of Nature (e.g. land, seeds, soil and water), labour and all the other elements and relationships that make the food system possible. We thus believe in the importance of de-commodifying food, but we think that it would be essential not to be satisfied with this achievement and to go beyond what we could call the ‘fetishism of the ‘de-commodity’’. Leaving aside – for now – the linear idea of phases of production, in this section we aim to make visible the complexity that constitutes the food system and engage with some of the elements (water, soil, labour and food infrastructures and landscape) that are essential to food production and therefore often the object of appropriation, enclosure and exploitation.

Water

Too often, discussions around food do not properly consider the intrinsic relationship between food and water. However, access to water and its use are increasingly contested, way beyond the traditional struggle between privatization of the network and bottling. For example, it has been increasingly proved that the production of food (livestock and fish in particular) is among the first responsible for water consumption in several parts of the world. Despite that, when droughts hit, as in California in 2015 or the Lazio Region (Italy) in 2017, local governments adopted measures aimed to reduced individual consumption of water (such as banning the irrigation of plants in the backyard) but did not take any initiative aimed at reducing the amount of water that was absorbed by farmers and livestock producers.

Similarly, the link between water and food should also be considered in light of the globalization of trade and construction of long-distance food chains. Research on the ‘global virtual water network’ produced by the University of Trento helps us to understand that transnational

movements of goods, and in particular of food, are nothing more than a reallocation of natural resources from one part of the world to another, including of the water content of fruit, vegetables, meat, etc. (Antonelli and Sartori, 2014).² When supermarkets in the United Kingdom display red peppers that were produced in Morocco, what they are doing is generating profit out of the combination of water, soil, labour, etc. extracted in the Global South and whose value (both in terms of utility and exchange value) is appropriated in the Global North. This different understanding of food as water raises important questions in terms of social justice, environmental degradation, long-term sustainability of production, etc. Moreover, it forces a critical audience to go beyond the idea of 'who owns the water at the source' and to engage with the broader compatibility of transnational trade with the idea that water (even when transformed into food) should be considered and treated as a commons.

Soil

The reader is certainly aware of Hardin's *Tragedy of the Commons* (1968) and the way in which the depletion of soil by grazing sheep was utilized to prove the need for individual property rights. Leaving aside the validity of the theory, which has been widely debated and dismissed, this example shows that the fertility of soil occupies a central spot in the overall debate around the commons. Like Hardin, Ostrom (1990) and Marx (1969) clearly identified the restorative capacity of the soil as essential in guaranteeing the reproduction of a system, whether in terms of its ecological stability or in terms of the limits of capitalism as an extractivist form of organizing the relationships between society and nature (Moore, 2015; Mattei and Capra, 2015).

In more concrete terms, soil is increasingly under pressure both from within the agricultural realm (loss of biodiversity, use of fertilizers, intensification of production, expansion of the livestock frontier, etc.) and from outside it (urbanization, land conversion, climate change, etc.). For example, Italy loses 35 ha of agricultural land every day to give space to urban areas (ISPRA, 2016), a circumstance that not only affects the landscape but also has clear repercussions in terms of labour, water usage, food security and dependence on international food trading. The defence of land and soil, along with water, therefore represents a crucial step in the struggle against commodification and appropriation. As discussed in the chapter by Ferrando and Maughan (this volume), movements like Grow Heathrow, People4Soil, Campi Aperti and Mondeggi Bene Comune offer clear examples of the close interconnection between access to land, fertility of the soil, biodiversity, food security and the establishment of a food system that is regenerative rather than extractivist.

On the contrary, the green scheme implemented by the latest Common Agricultural Policy appears to go in the opposite direction, focusing on a superficial attempt to include environmental considerations in the framework of conventional food production without a proper assessment of the intrinsic link between soil, lives and agroecological practices. As a consequence, the green scheme lacks any reference to access to land as a prerequisite of a socially and environmentally sustainable agricultural policy (given the possibility of breaking down large-scale industrial production into a multiplicity of agroecological farms), and contains the provision of direct payments and subsidies that facilitate the abandonment of unsustainable activities but do not reward those who were already respecting the environment and the soil with their agricultural practices. Differently from the rhetoric proposed by the European Commission or digital agriculture, a true transition can only occur through the abandonment of the vision of land and soil as homogeneous and standardized spaces (Scott, 1998), and through their recognition as complex and living ecosystems that are constantly redefined by their interaction with human and non-human beings.

Labour and food infrastructures

Try to grow your own food, and you will become aware of the amount of time and labour that is required. Talk to a farmer, and this will be even more evident. However, one of the most striking features of the conventional food system is its ability of making labour invisible. For an increasing number of people, food is not grown or brought to the supermarkets: it appears. An exception is when labour is transformed into a commercial sale point – as in the case of the Colombian coffee farmer who, being portrayed as stereotypical and smiley cherry picker who rides a donkey and appears not to be struggling, allows coffee multinationals to provide consumers with the idea of immediacy and familiarity. In these cases, labour itself becomes a commodity and an opportunity to generate even more value than what is extracted through production. A well-portrayed smile makes consumers forget the thousands of miles that separate land from cup, hides the role of coffee traders and the hyper-concentrated market and convinces each drinker of the biggest lie, i.e. that because we know who grew our coffee, farmers must know to whom and for how much the product of their labour is sold.

Together with labour, the commodification of food has been very good at hiding the importance of capital and infrastructures in producing what is eaten. Along with people, the fetishization of food suppresses questions and concerns surrounding to the ownership of the means of production, the distribution of the value that is added through transformation, the power dynamics that characterize each relationship along the chain and the geographical distribution of production, transformation and consumption. Following on from the coffee example, although consumers are aware of the thousands of small-scale farmers who harvest the beans, they seem to be oblivious that those beans will be traded only by a bunch of transnational companies, or that few rosters all over the world control more than 50% of the transformation process. On the contrary, production can be collective and generate different socio-economic dynamics. This is the case of the communal bread ovens that still exist in several villages in the Italian Alps (Sasia, 2014) or communal land whose products are shared among the members of the farming community and the people in the surrounding areas. In these cases, the link between labour, capital, personal development, community cohesion and ecological limit appears evident and truly transformative. As discussed below, we thus believe that a truly commons-based food system could not avoid questions of ownership, dignity of labour and distribution of value and resources.

Food as landscape

As the reader would certainly recognize, food is much more than its material reality and is closely connected with the immaterial and cultural. Movements and organizations that aim to protect and safeguard food and are evidence of the intrinsic interconnections between food and a collective way of being, but also between food, history and identity. This is the case, for example, of processes of patrimonialization of food culture such as the inclusion of food cultural knowledge in the UNESCO list of Intangible Cultural Heritage (Brulotte and Di Giovine, 2014; Matta, 2016; UNESCO, 2003).

However, the intangible relevance of food goes beyond its cultural and ‘traditional’ aspects and concerns the way in which food production and consumption shape the landscape and vice versa. As discussed by Carolyn Steel (2006) in her account of how London was fed throughout centuries, or as more recently proposed by Jason W. Moore with regards to the mutually constitutive relationship between society and nature, there is little doubt that the world that we see around us today has been shaped and defined by food. From the transition from nomadism to sedentarism, from the occupation of new land to feed the growing Roman military, to the food routes that were connecting the four corners of the planet and that drastically changed what is

grown and eaten and by whom (think of the way in which corn, potatoes and tomatoes have transformed entire regions of the world after being extracted from Latin America). Any attempt to engage with the food system as a commons would thus have to take into consideration the power that food has in transforming and being transformed by society and nature, and consider them as two elements of the same equation rather than as antagonistic or separated.

After this quick depiction of the vertical slice below food as a commons, we hope the reader may be convinced that engaging with food means engaging with water, soil, land, labour, culture and landscape, and much more. Food is the expression of a material and immaterial complexity that is often hidden behind the ‘stuff’ that people buy, transform, consume and throw away. This is even more the case at a time of mediatization of food, TV programs, food-based theme parks³ and ‘*dancing mozzarella*’ (Bukowski, 2015). The food system disappears. Food is a show. Consumers – and not people – interact with an object aimed at giving individual physical or emotional pleasure, but not at creating connections and community. A view of food as a commons cannot ignore it and cannot be satisfied with fixing only some of the ecological and social inconsistencies of a commodified food system. In the next section, we thus take a detour from the individual manifestations of food as a commons and offer some rough thoughts on what it would mean to adopt a commons-based approach to the food system.

From elements to phases: a commons-based approach to the food system

We have just discussed the possibility of looking at the food system through the individual components that constitute it. From land to labour, it is possible to single out various elements of the food chain and discuss what changes would be needed to move away from a proprietary conception to a communal understanding and a collective form of governance. However, we are aware that a fragmented approach to water, land and soil, infrastructures, animals, biodiversity, etc., may weaken the strength of the commons as a holistic approach to nature and society, and therefore give way to partial and short-term spatial and temporal fixes (Harvey, 2003) rather than a systemic redefinition of the food system. For this reason, we propose to take the ‘fetishism of the food commodity’ – the idea that food is objectified and transformed into an object without history or complexity – seriously, to trace and map not only the individual elements but also the hidden combinations of socio-economic relationships that lie behind what humans and non-human beings eat. By paying attention to elements and phases, we propose a radical alternative to the conventional food regime (McMichael, 2009), an imaginary that is fully informed by the idea that food as a commons cannot be produced by practices that are non-ecological and socially unjust.

In the process of *commoning* the food system, we should engage with the ideological scaffolding that keeps the current regime alive. Firstly, the redefinitions of growth and production techniques (for both plants and animals) must be placed at the centre. However, this would also face the greatest opposition. At a time of changing dietary habits and mounting pressure to increase productivity, there is little doubt that conventional agriculture and industrial animal production represent two of the most serious threats to the achievement of an ecologically and socially just food system. Would we accept the provision of universal access to food in the name of the commons when this food is rooted in monoculture and loss of biodiversity, large-scale and capital intense farming, strong dependence on water and oil-based chemical inputs, exploitative labour practices, support of unhealthy diets, and based on an inefficient use of resources and a very heavy carbon footprint? These are all conditions that appear to be incompatible with the paradigm and principles that we are advocating. Yet, they increasingly lurk behind the dream of ending hunger and redistributing what is produced on the planet. Malthus is brought back to life and his vision used to defy the possibility of a commons-based food system. Similarly, would we accept technological innovations that offer remedies to some of the hardest environmental

and economic problems of farmers but at the same time contribute to an increase in the objectification and control of nature because algorithms, genetic modifications and satellites are constructed in order to automatically respond to nature's variability and inherent unpredictability?

A second area of investigation should be that of food distribution, i.e. the actors and institutions that create and operate the logistics corridors that make (some) food available to (some) consumers. Often marginalized and understudied, after the food–fuel–finance crises of 2007–2009, the physical network that distributes food around the world has increasingly been understood as the missing element of any food policy (Sonnino and Faus, 2014). The way in which large-scale distribution produces and accumulates economic value defines how the food chain affects both producers (who often have to accept decreasing prices and join a global competition among farmers) and consumers (whose choices are often limited and determined by efficiency and logistical constraints rather than by their own needs and rights). A redefinition of the food chain under the paradigm of the commons should thus take into consideration the way in which distribution patterns and procedures affect the space where they take place, how they redefine the identity and lives of the people who are involved (Tsing, 2015) and how they impact the environment that is transformed into a logistic corridor and absorbs most of the externalities that are produced (Cowen, 2015).

Thirdly, a systemic analysis of food as a commons would require engaging with consumption as a practice that is varied and hard to map. However, no serious attempt at commoning the food system could avoid considering aspects such as the spaces where food is consumed; the cultural implications of food; the limits and effects of consumers' choices; the modalities, forms and time of food consumption; and the injustice behind the geographical and social diversity between the spaces where food is prepared and consumed. On the other hand, a commons-based food system could not ignore the centrality of the act of cooking as a social, cultural and democratic moment that should always connect the consumption of food with the act of preparing it, possibly in community kitchens where inequality and idiosyncratic behaviours can be overcome by a sharing approach and the horizontality of relationships. Even more than the two previous phases, the quality and dignity of work, and in particular of reproductive and care labour, cannot be ignored and should be put at the forefront of a systemic transformation (Federici, 2004; Alessandrini, 2011).

Finally, a commons-based analysis of the food system should pay attention to the ability of the existing setting to guarantee that no food is lost or wasted. However, this does not mean accepting that people living in food poverty are fed with the food that no one else has bought, as is the case for most of the contemporary interventions around food waste. Rather than supporting a common vision of the food system, the mere reallocation of the excesses legitimates the underlying assumption that food is a commodity and therefore can be produced in abundance and wasted with little or no economic cost for the responsible. On the contrary, actors and institutions should be organized in a way that production, transportation and consumption satisfy both the needs of the human population and deal with nature and resources in an ecological and regenerative way. Aesthetic standards, long-distance traveling, excesses in production and purchase, aggressive marketing strategies and any activity that leads to the generation of surplus and waste should not be covered up by the work of charities and food banks, but thoroughly analysed and exposed for their social and environmental unacceptability.

Of course, what we have just presented is a simplistic and pretty rough reconstruction of the areas that would be particularly affected by a redefinition of the food system according to the vision and objectives of the commons. However, we are convinced that this first step can help thinking systemically about food and the transformations that would need take place if we were to construct a new network based on the pillars of equality, justice, democracy, ecology and bottom-up participation. Rather than a methodological or analytical tool, the shift from food as

a commons to food systems as a commons is a political drift that requires the recognition of the limits of fragmentation of the current approach to food (as if it were composed of a multiplicity of independent areas such as education, health, poverty, etc.).

All over the world, conceptualizations and experiences such as the *City-Region Food System*, the *local food system* (Hinrichs, 2003) and the *Systèmes Agro-Alimentaires Localisés – SIAL* (Cerdan et al., 2017) are trying to intensify the connections between the different phases and highlight the importance that each has with people, places and nature. In the section that follows, we look at Alternative Food Networks and Urban Food Strategies as two forms of engagement with the systemic nature of food and two opportunities to implement and integrate a commons-based approach to the way in which actors, institutions, places, rights, resources and nature are coordinated around food. What appears clear is the inherent and inalienable connection between food and territory, so that the latter becomes the starting point for our interpretation of the food system through the prism of the commons.

Food system as a commons: theories and practices

In the previous sections, we have discussed why the different components and relationships that constitute a food system should be considered as a commons and speculated on what social and ecological transformation would take place if this was to happen. Sceptical of the economic definition of the commons, which only focuses on rivalry and excludability, we have adopted a position that is closer to what may be considered a political approach to the commons (Mattei, 2013), i.e. we recognize the importance of taking the food system outside of the market–state dualism and rebuilding it around horizontal subsidiarity and the ecological limits of the planet. In this view, we believe in the adoption of a systemic vision of the food system that actively and responsibly involves all the actors, places, phase and dimensions of the food chain.

In our proposal, we find certain similarities with what Magnaghi (2012, p. 4) calls a ‘return to the territory’, i.e. a material and immaterial shift of society in opposition to the process of de-territorialization which characterizes our times. In his words:

in contemporary society [we see that the] cure of the territorial commons has become increasingly feeble and distracted while processes of privatization of these same goods and their use are expanding and with them the de-territorialization of production and consumption. [...] in order to strengthen the concept of territory as a commons it is not enough to consider the territory in itself as a public good [...] it is necessary that it is considered, it sounds obvious, as a commons, that cannot be sold nor the object of *usucapio*, similarly to what happens to historical civic lands and that is characterized by an autonomy of use which makes it different from property (both public and private). It is here that we can start a search of new forms of management, based on participatory processes and active citizenship, which would bring back to life the meaning and the principles (although not necessarily the form) of civic uses.⁴

Like the process of re-territorialization, the idea of the food system as a commons requires the redefinition of the underlying institutions of the food chain and the attribution of new roles to all its actors. Apart from the dualism between private and public, commons-based food systems require producers, transformers, traders, consumers and all the other participants to be actively involved in a self-conscious and democratic process of co-production and co-determination of the food system. All the moments are connected and relevant, including that of consumption, which becomes an opportunity to critically and politically engage with the rest of the chain,

although not the sole leverage. This would mean regaining control over the food system and aiming towards true and effective food democracy.

In this view, we are intrigued by the idea of *food citizenship* advanced by Wilkins (2005, p. 271) as the “practice of engaging in food-related behaviours that support, rather than threaten, the development of a democratic, socially and economically just, and environmentally sustainable food system.” This new form of citizenship, which is at the same time aware, responsible and active, appears crucial to the vision of the food system as a commons, and is therefore welcomed. However, it will be important to avoid a simple linguistic shift from consumers to food citizens and co-producers, and promote instead a radical understanding of the socio-economic-ecological implications of the food system. Otherwise, this transition would simply reinforce ongoing attempts to ‘green-wash’ the existing system and to convince consumers that they can really make a difference, while they are simply scratching the surface of the iceberg (Ferrando, 2017).

Among the multiple experiences that may be considered expressions of a commons-based approach to food systems, we have decided to present and offer some thoughts on two of the axes that Wiskerke (2009) utilizes to define alternative food geographies: a) Alternative Food Networks and b) Urban Food Strategies. Although they are limited in space and scale, we believe that these examples provide important element for intellectual and political engagement. Avoiding any easy optimism and being conscious of the risk of legitimizing niche and gentrifying practices, we thus hope that they can be taken as inspiration for future and different interventions that may exclusively rely on members of the community or even combine a bottom-up push from the people with the facilitating and coordinating role of a renewed and truly democratic public authority.

Alternative Food Networks as co-production of food

Most of the time, Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) are defined by referring to what they are not. Rather than a lack of identity and character, this is a sign of the heterogeneity of the practices that fall into these categories: whether formal and informal, linked with production, distribution or consumption, AFNs propose and practice models that oppose the conventional food system, the centrality of agribusiness and the dominance of Large-Scale Retail Distribution. The alternative character does not depend, therefore, on one single element. On the contrary, it can be connected with the establishment of horizontal relationships among the members of the network, the shortening of the distance between production and consumption, the acknowledgment and redistribution of power throughout the chain, a focus on the ecological value of the chain and its interactions with the planet, the use of food as a means to struggle for social and spatial justice or other features that clash with the dominant corporate food system (Goodman et al., 2012).

Some help in the identification of common features, although not an exhaustive methodology, comes from Jarosz (2008), according to whom AFN experiences are often characterized by the presence of at least one of the following elements: a) a reduction of the distance between producers and consumers; b) the construction around small-scale farming and/or a low or positive ecological impact; c) purchase schemes that are not exclusively based on the exchange value of food but also consider the social interaction between producers, distributors and consumers and the socio-economic utility that it generates; or d) a clear identification of the political nature of the process and of the role that a different food system can play in achieving social, economic and environmental sustainability.

A point of interaction between AFNs and the commons relies, in our opinion, in the motivation that pushes an increasing number of producers, distributors and consumers in certain parts

of the world (and certain parts of communities) to join these networks rather than conventional food spaces like supermarkets. Although we are aware that several cases of labour and environmental abuses have been reported in the case of practices that claim to be alternative, we believe that most AFNs offer a valid example of the way in which the food system can be constructed from the bottom up and participated in by its members, and have each of its phases constructed not as an end in themselves but as elements of a dynamic and continuous dialog between food, actors, institutions and the planet (Hendrickson and Haffernan, 2002; Sonnino and Marsden, 2006). Leaving aside those examples where participation is due to mere financial considerations or convenience (Tregear, 2011), there are several realities where AFNs express their members' desire to be critically and actively engaged in a food system that is better in terms of economic, social and environmental impact.

Out of the different examples, we consider Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) to best represent the possibilities of thinking, building, managing and implementing a food system that produces much more utility than the one deriving from food consumption and the impacts of which are perceived well beyond the circle of actors involved. As with AFNs, even CSAs cannot be easily defined. Like most AFNs, they refer to a variety of partnerships between farmers and consumers. What is unique, we believe, is the level of consumer involvement: on the one hand, they pay in advance for a share of the annual (or bi-monthly) production and obtain the right to a share of whatever the farm will produce; on the other hand, most of the schemes require them to pick and distributes shares every week, so as to strengthen the relationships between growers and consumers and also among consumers, and they can also contribute with hours of work in addition to or in replacement of the payment.

Thanks to the direct financial and personal involvement of consumers, CSAs challenge the idea of food systems as based on competition and food prices as based on market dynamics. "Farmers do their best to produce sufficient quantities, quality of food and variety to meet consumers' needs" (Junge et al., 1995), but price and food availability are not the sole determinant of the farmers' activity and their ability to continue doing their job. On the contrary, farmers and consumers establish a relationship that is based on solidarity and mutual support, where risks and benefits are shared between everyone so that ecological and socially sustainable food growing can continue (almost) independently from the volatility of prices and the direness of climate change.

Urban Food Strategies: institutional frameworks to experience a commons-based approach to food systems

An integrated approach to the multidimensionality of food and the complexity of the food system can also be institutionalized via the elaboration of transversal public policies that aim to coordinate and manage together all the areas of intervention that are related to food: education, health, agriculture, public procurement, urban planning, waste management, food aid, etc. In both the Global North and the Global South, local authorities have been engaged in the study, facilitation and implementation of policies and concrete measures that use their regulatory, administrative and financial power in order to oppose the worst effects of the hyper-commodification of food and of the food system.

In the North, the cities of Toronto (Blay-Palmer, 2009; Mah and Thang, 2013), New York (Morgan and Sonnino, 2010; Morgan, 2015) and San Francisco (Morgan and Sonnino, 2010) are considered among the pioneers. On the other side of the Atlantic, attempts to develop integrated urban food strategies have reached the United Kingdom (see Carey, 2013 for a discussion on Bristol; Partnership for Coventry, 2017), Northern Europe (Wiskerke, 2009; Cretella and

Buenger, 2016) and Greece (Skordili, 2013). Similarly, examples are visible in Australia (Caraher et al., 2013), China (Lang and Miao, 2013), Brazil (Rocha and Lessa, 2009) and several other parts of the Global South, where the debate around ecological and integrated food systems is closely intertwined with that around food sovereignty, access to land and the rights of the peasants (Borras et al., 2015; Ferrando and Vivero-Pol, 2017).⁵

Although different, all these experiences are characterized by the attempt to establish bottom-up processes of participation and dialog among all the actors who are more or less integrated into the food system (from the actual operators to academia, migrant workers and civic society), so that they can all contribute to the elaboration of a common vision and to the identification of the actions that are needed to achieve it. Often, urban food strategies capitalize on existing networks and connections, trying to move beyond their individual frameworks and to offer a coherent and coordinated opportunity to work together towards the identification of processes, practices and mechanisms that can guarantee (universal or targeted) access to healthy, local, socially just, ecological and culturally appropriate food (Sonnino, 2009). Each city and each authority has defined its priorities and its pattern. However, some choices appear to be recurrent and characterized by a high level of interconnection, including re-territorializing production and consumption, filling the gap between rural and urban, 're-moralizing' food systems (Morgan, 2010), improving food education and food literacy, establishing food hubs and community kitchens and peer-to-peer support in changing purchasing and consumption habits.

One of the strongest features of urban food strategies is their positive impact in terms of food security (Sonnino and Spayde, 2014), which is mainly due to the level of independence that local authorities and communities obtain vis-à-vis market dynamics and the abandonment of a reductionist approach to food security as a simple matter of feeding hungry people. As discussed by Lang (2010), the holistic and systemic approach embedded into urban food strategies provides other forms of support and integration beyond the division between providers and receivers of food. More importantly, they create new spaces for food (beyond the food banks and traditional places where food security is pivotal), which can use food (and food practices) to generate other forms of value that are not only economic but also spatial, social and cultural.

Despite our enthusiasm, the analysis of more than 60 sustainable food policies,⁶ including the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, has revealed a lack of the term 'commons' or any specific understanding of food policies as a way to construct a commons-based food system. However, we believe that these instruments represent an 'indirect narrative' of the food system as a commons: as a matter of fact, they offer different levels of recognition of the multiple dimensions of urban food systems; talk about participation and ecology; are based on bottom-up processes and on coordination with the public authority as a facilitator of collective processes; and understand the importance of avoiding a fragmented attitude towards the complexity and interdependency of food production, transformation, transportation, consumption and post-consumption. Whether institutionalized or not, the idea that food systems have to be thought of and governed as a commons is already embedded in several experiences around the world. Rather than starting from scratch, it is thus a matter of awareness, narrative, and consolidation.

Conclusions

The publication of an edited volume on *Food as a Commons* is evidence of the intellectual and practical desire for transitioning away from the idea of food as a commodity in order to find a long-term solution to the social, economic and environmental injustice that characterizes the corporate food regime (McMichael, 2009). In this regard, our contribution has proposed moving a step further and recognizes the necessity of combining the paradigm of the commons with

a holistic approach to the food system. Rather than focusing on food as a commons, we have proposed engaging with the entire food system as a commons (or, in other words, adopting a commons-based approach to the food system), recognizing that food is the final expression of an intricate network of people, institutions, spaces, nature, power and several other elements. If we want to achieve the goal of democratic, just and ecological food for all, there is no alternative than constructing, organizing and practicing each of these moments and the whole food system as a commons.

Needless to say, we are aware that our proposal is not risk-free. First of all, we realize that if everything is a commons, nothing is a commons. For this reason, the possible links between food systems and the paradigm of the commons must be critically unpacked and assessed. Especially when it comes to constructing public narratives and claiming political interventions. A second, more specific, risk is that an excessive reliance on bottom-up mechanisms and processes for commoning the food system may represent an excuse for public actors to dismiss their legal and political responsibilities in terms of food security and food justice, socio-spatial equality, economic and environmental sustainability and control over anti-social and anti-ecological practices, in particular when it comes to regions of the world with a high level of inequality between areas and communities. Commoning the food system means changing the assumptions around each phase of the food chain, identifying and redistributing responsibilities, redefining practices and spaces for deliberation and identifying which actors shall be rewarded and which excluded. In no way shall it be leveraged to legitimize the neoliberal dream of the minimum state, or the creation of niches of sustainable and healthy food systems surrounded by a sea of conventional practices.

Notes

- 1 Translation by the authors. Italics added by the authors.
- 2 <http://web.unitn.it/ssi/26959/the-global-virtual-water-network-social-economic-and-environmental-implications>
- 3 We are making reference to the Fabbrica Italiana Contadina (FICO), the latest food project launched by Oscar Farinetti, the founder of Eataly, together with Eataly World, Coop Alleanza 3.0 and Coop Reno. FICO is a 100,000-square-meter theme park where food is at the same time an attraction and a commodity to buy.
- 4 Translation by the authors. In Italy, the term “usi civici” refers to the right of collective use that some communities can exercise on public or (less frequently) private goods, such as natural resources, pastures, woods and so on. The right to “usi civici” is still ruled by Italian national law (l. 1766/1927).
- 5 The authors have been recently involved in similar processes in the cities of Turin and Coventry. In both circumstances, the actors of the food system, members of the academia, city councils, civil society and some representatives of the private sector have gathered to discuss possible forms of integration and coordination between existing policies and projects, with the idea of combining a short-term intervention against food hunger with a long-term redefinition of the local food system. At the European level, in 2016 IPES-Food launched an interesting attempt to improve the coherence and coordination of European policies that affect the food system, with the aim of establishing a European Common Food Policy by 2019.
- 6 We have analysed all the food charters and food policies produced by the members of the UK Sustainable Food Cities (www.sustainablefoodcities.org) along with 20 documents released by cities and regions in the USA, Canada and Northern Europe.

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