



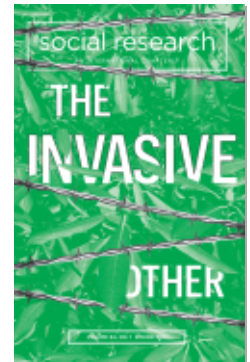
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Invaders

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Global Trade, Food Safety, and the Fear of Invisible Invaders

IN RECENT DECADES, FOOD HAS EMERGED AS AN INCREASINGLY RELEVANT domain in social and political debates. A variety of factors beginning in the 1970s have played a role in the inception of the new prominence of all things food: growing concerns about the environment, sustainability, and resilience, heightened by the awareness of climate change; the embrace of alternative food production and consumption modes, from the “back to the land movement” to macrobiotics in the counterculture of the 1970s to today’s farmers’ markets and community-supported agriculture organizations; preoccupations with personal health and nutrition, experienced as closely connected with what we eat; greater visibility in all kinds of media, and especially in social networks, from blogs to Instagram; the prevalence of the so-called experience economy in postindustrial society, where consumers want more than just products; a desire to break free from the mass-produced industrial food managed by big business and the desire for more embedded food production; and the acknowledgement that food availability and accessibility, as well as individual and communal food security, are key components of the struggle toward social justice.

In this context, the attention paid to how food is produced, distributed, bought, cooked, and disposed of has reached new heights, causing unprecedented anxiety at all levels, from the personal to the international. Wherever there is a body, be it physical or political, and such body is conceptualized and experienced as an autonomous

and self-contained reality, the fear of dangerous intrusions caused by the unavoidable necessity of ingestion is often palpable. Food and eating thus become fields in which the Other—over which we inevitably feel we have limited control—is resisted and at times fought against. Individuals may not want to consume products containing genetically modified organisms (GMOs) or growth hormones; they are wary of food adulterations and counterfeits; they may prefer to consume local products, even when what counts as “local” varies greatly; they may be suspicious of foreign ingredients and dishes, expressing reactions that range from curiosity to outright refusal; and finally, they may want to support local food jobs, at the regional and national level, by limiting imports from abroad. Furthermore, the possibility of food-borne diseases and pests, such as the avian flu, makes food imports a delicate and controversial aspect of international trade. Overall, individual citizens and societies fear contaminations and illnesses that may come through what we ingest, both physically and metaphorically.

How do fears of otherness impinge on our experience of food? In reflecting on this question I do not aim to be exhaustive but rather to outline directions for future, larger research projects, with the goal of bridging different fields and disciplines such as biology, bio-engineering, environmental sciences, economics, sociology, and politics. Here we will see how preoccupations about individual bodies are reflected and generated by concerns ranging from the micro (for instance, GMOs and the intestinal biome) to the macro (the environment and international trade).

FOOD ANXIETIES

Food literally becomes us, sustaining us and allowing us to thrive. At the same time, it remains an extraneous matter that we necessarily incorporate, with all the risks that such a dynamic entails. Anxiety and ambivalence are inevitable. The French social scientist Claude Fischler noticed how human beings are constantly pulled between two opposite attitudes, *neophobia* and *neophilia*: the curiosity to try

new food, based on the omnivorous nature of man, and the fear of being poisoned (Fischler 1990). We are painfully aware that food can be both a source of nourishment (and pleasure) and a very dangerous substance, if taken in excessive quantities, or badly cooked, or just clumsily chosen. As Paul Rozin observed:

The insulated, safe self, protected by skin from the rest of the world, experiences a material breach of this boundary every day in the act of eating. The world enters the self. This is an act that be exquisitely pleasurable, but also frightening; an act that nourishes, at the same time as it increases the chances of death or illness by toxins and microorganisms. (Rozin 1999, 14)

It is not surprising that diet and nutrition have become crucial elements in defining identities and lifestyles in postindustrial societies, where access to food—although still highly problematic for many—is too often discounted as a preoccupation of the past. Individuals and communities choose what they eat—and what they refuse to eat—based on ethical or environmental motivations (for instance, vegetarians and vegans), political attitudes (think about preference for local food and preoccupation about the treatment of agricultural labor), health concerns (from gluten-free to paleo diets), body image preoccupations, or exclusionary attitudes (“That is white trash food!” or “I can’t deal with the smell of Indian restaurants”). Food is often used as a metaphor for otherness and, quite often, to affirm cultural superiority. For lack of information or because of deeply encroached identifications, the food of strangers can be looked upon as barbarian, uncouth, dirty, even disgusting. An analysis of these phenomena can allow individuals to acknowledge their specific location within a cultural formation and in relation to other cultural backgrounds.

However, even the most cursory reflection on the relationship between food and the body should quickly discount any fantasy about self-containment. As philosophers Lisa Heldke and Raymond Boisvert

observe, “appetite re-emphasizes our continuity with the natural world. It makes us aware of our multiple connections and interdependencies: with the sun, soil, ants, bacteria, earth-worms, plants as well as with other humans that grow, harvest, deliver and distribute food-stuffs” (Boisvert and Heldke 2016, 163). Bodies are porous and embedded in complex ecologies, from the micro to the macro level. Impressive research is being conducted on the intestinal microbiome, that is to say, the “ecological community of commensal, symbiotic, and pathogenic microorganisms” that share our body space and is now indicated as both the possible cause and the solution of many health problems (Lederberg and McCray 2001). At the macro level, our food choices are entangled in food systems that connect soils with plants and animals, producers, distributors, consumers, and all the living creatures that contribute to turn leftovers and waste into compost.

Many delicious foods are produced by the action of bacteria: it is enough to mention cheese and yogurt. The ongoing debate between those who defend traditional and artisanal cheese-making methods and those who support more hygienic—and more industrial—standards embodies this tension between two conceptions of infection. The French philosopher Michel Serres tackled this theme when he pointed out that the word “parasite” literally means something that eats next to or beside something else (Serres 2007). This means that the word refers not only to a presence that consumes food and drink without giving anything back but also to neutral neighbor eaters and to symbiotic partners who live in continuous, productive exchange with their hosts. The same ambivalence can be found in the Latin word *hostis*, which means both stranger and enemy, and in the Greek *xénos*, which refers to strangers and guests. It seems that whenever a group finds itself facing elements coming from outside, blurring the barriers and the boundaries that define its identity, its attitude oscillates between hospitality and hostility. Yet against any logic based on dualities and oppositions, parasites introduce dynamics that favor pluralities and transformations, interdependence and innovation, reciprocity and mutuality. Parasitic behaviors would then point to a

community not based on what unites in a single identity—ethnic, territorial, and spiritual—but rather on a common bond, a mutual gift. Here lies the etymological origin of the very word “community”: *communus*, where *munus* in Latin means obligation, service, and the given gift, not the received one (Esposito 2009 and 2011).

BATTLING THE OTHER

If we do not accept and embrace the inherent porosity of our bodies and our embeddedness in larger ecological systems, decisions about eating may end up being experienced as an uninterrupted battle against the always pressing and invasive Others. Meals unite and divide. They connect those who share them, confirm their identities as individuals and as a collectivity, and reinforce their mutual bonds. At the same time, meals exclude those who do not participate in them, threatening and negating their very humanity. Food has always been one of the defining aspects of any given social group; its members would acknowledge each other as such by the way they eat, by what they eat, and by what they abhor to eat. Food is not only central to ethnic consciousness; it is also paramount to the formation of historical regional and national identities as well as to the development of international trade, migration, and mobility dynamics.

In their material aspects, food habits and behaviors, culinary traditions and identities, are tightly connected with the body, revealing at the same time the nooks and crannies of the material foundations of power and politics. Although the close connections between the body and food are self-explanatory, reflections about food as a political instrument aimed at controlling bodies in their most fundamental and intimate dimension have been sporadic. As some currents in contemporary thought are trying to demonstrate, the body is far from being an apolitical, natural given. The ways it is conceived, developed, controlled and disciplined, identified and interpreted, are inherently political. The ways we choose, store, prepare, cook, ingest, digest, and excrete food determine how our bodies relate with the outside world and with other bodies.

Power legitimacy is successfully reinforced when its underlying principles and ideology—more or less evident and disclosed in the public space—reach and tangibly shape private realms of experience such as the body, sexuality, food habits, and nutrition. These more hidden forms of control or discipline—which are often referred to as biopolitics, following Michel Foucault’s reflection—are usually excluded from public discourses, creating the illusion of the political neutrality of the body, whose fluid constitution and cultural inscription in materiality become instead the battlefield for cultural, social, and political struggles to exert control over the individual (Lemke 2001, 190–207). The body, far from being merely natural, thus becomes the arena where power expresses itself in its more fundamental modalities. While cultural theorists have often pointed to sex as a site of these political struggles, ingestion has been left aside, regardless of its foundational role in the development of subjectivity.

Eating and the often ambivalent relations to food allow individuals and communities to express anxieties about the possible dilution and the eventual erasure of their specificities and uniqueness. Self-sufficiency, often expressed through the desire for embedded and local food systems, is identified with an authentic and safe state of nature that is opposed to the dangerous and porous present condition of the world. This latter is the result of cultural and historical processes of globalization, frequently resented as invasive. However, even the most cursory assessment of food history points to the fact that all cuisines are in fact the result of hybridization, adaptation, and appropriation, more or less planned or wanted. The culinary traditions of the Americas, for instance, would not exist if Native American customs, ingredients, and technologies had not mixed with those belonging to the African slaves forcefully brought to the New World, and later with wave after wave of immigrants. Such processes are seldom easy and painless, as power relations, economic structures, and political dynamics weigh heavily on their development.

In the United States, immigrant culinary customs were often discounted, if not disparaged as disgusting, by mainstream society

(Diner 2009; Gabaccia 1998). As early as the 1850s, the Chinese foodways were criticized for including excessive consumption of rice and vegetables instead of meat and more “civilized” staples (Chen 2014). Later, Italian food was considered too smelly and not nourishing; well-meaning social workers tried—with little success—to impose the principles of the New England style that the burgeoning home economics were defining at the time (Cinotto 2013). Similar reactions took place as new waves of immigrants tried to assimilate into the United States. Over time, their foodways were integrated into the local repertoires but often in a subaltern position. Not many Americans would be willing to spend much on a Chinese or Mexican meal, generally perceived as cheap and unpretentious.

INVISIBLE INVADERS

Newcomers are often perceived as an incumbent threat to the normal functioning of the social body, even depicted as viruses or parasites by a rhetoric that literally interprets all these phenomena in terms of infection and immunization (see Raffles, this issue). Groups of foreign settlers are at times compared to wounds that may cause sickness to the whole body. These rhetorical arguments have cropped up in many different fields, revealing a stubborn pervasiveness and cultural relevance. The same metaphor—centered on invasive elements—is also found in a totally different domain: computer science. The whole world is obsessed with the perceived danger coming from hackers and viruses that can infect hard disks and devastate entire networks. It is enough to remember the year 2000 computer scare (Y2K) that shook the world at the threshold of the new millennium. The same fear of infection dominates discourses about public and individual health, with diseases such as Ebola and more recently the Zika virus, raising the bar for hygiene and prevention and causing widespread concerns about approaching stranger bodies. It would appear that the risk society, evoked by Ulrich Beck as resulting from lack of control and certainties, simultaneously expresses its deeper fears and finds them constantly confirmed through metaphors of penetration, infection, and other subtle forms of intrusion (Beck 1992).

When it comes to food, it is not always easy to identify invasive agents, as they are often invisible and, for that very reason, even more threatening. Many dangerous substances can enter the body through our food. As the industrialization and concentration of food production in Western countries, such as the United States and Great Britain, led to the diffusion of mechanized agricultural methods, farmers took to using fertilizers that were increasingly available and affordable as a peacetime application of the chemistry technologies that the industry of explosive materials developed during World War I (Leigh 2004). Pesticides were also increasingly necessary as the previous ecosystems were destroyed to make room for monocultures. Starting in the 1920s, as a reaction to these invasive and often invisible additions, a reform movement gave rise to what we today know as organic farming, with the work of Albert Howard in India and Rudolph Steiner in Germany; this later developed into biodynamic agriculture (Conford and Dimpleby 2001). Over the years, organic farming has turned into a multi-million-dollar business that has also attracted giant retailers such as Target and Wal-Mart, which have lately become big sellers of organic products.

The shift from small organic farms to corporate distributors of certified organic food has created a rift within the organic food movement. Those who are more engaged in the political, antisystem aspects of production resent that the forces of capitalism are invading our bodies by hiding themselves in a kind of food that came about as a form of resistance to capitalist food production in the first place. Others, instead, appreciate that less-affluent consumers are now also able to have a greater say about what enters their bodies. As a matter of fact, many farmers themselves prefer not to go through the lengthy and expensive process of gaining the right to use the United States Department of Agriculture's "Organic" label, preferring instead to create direct connections with consumers who know and trust them.

In such cases, not only are invisible pesticides and fertilizers perceived and fought against, but also the political and corporate powers that support them are further conceptualized as invasive. Of

course, pests and insects that constitute a potential threat to crops are considered dangerous, but growing interest in ecological dynamics and integrated agriculture is shifting focus toward less heavy-handed pest management through the introduction of different species—described in terms of allies and stewards of the environment rather than intruders—that can limit the expansion of the destructive ones.

The growing fear of GMO food and seeds expresses the anxiety that invisible extraneous elements might sneak in from outside and affect the core of our bodily identity. GMOs are not only feared as artificial elements believed to cause allergic reactions and damage our health if ingested, but they are themselves the result of the intrusion of “Others” into “natural” DNA sequences. One of the factors that underlie many concerns about GMOs in food is the presence of DNA from extraneous species, spliced and inserted—thanks to genetic engineering techniques—into new DNA chains not found in nature. A common expression for such products is “Frankenfoods,” which is a direct reference to Mary Shelley’s monster, often used as a symbol of scientific hubris that cannot be controlled and inevitably causes disasters. These DNA insertions bring changes in the organism, adding traits that are favorable to production, such as higher yields, pest resistance, or longer shelf life. Farmers have searched for positive traits in their crops since the beginning of agriculture, breeding and selecting plants that better responded to their needs. However, GMO opponents argue that genetic interventions that do not happen through traditional breeding techniques are completely different. They express not only concern for human health but also for the spread of GMO organisms into other crops through pollination, which threatens agrobiodiversity. Furthermore, the owners of GMO seeds have sued farmers into whose fields the wind, animals, and other natural agents had carried seeds that then germinated and grew. The accusation is in fact that such farmers stole and planted GMO seeds without the permission of the owners of the patents of the genetic material.

GMO technologies have exponentially expanded since 1980, when the United States Supreme Court, in the *Diamond v. Chakrabarty*

case, upheld the first patent on a newly created living organism, a bacterium for digesting crude oil in oil spills. The patent had been at first rejected by the United States Patent and Trademark Office but the Supreme Court ruled that if an organism that is truly “man-made” or modified by the application of genetic engineering, and as such is the result of invention and innovation, then it is patentable. Since then, genetic modification of plants and animals has become the object of both well-funded research, as the patents protect future incomes, and heated debates at all levels. For instance, several attempts have been made in the US to force food producers to clearly indicate on labels the presence of genetically modified ingredients, allowing consumers to choose what they want to buy and ingest. The American Medical Association and the American Association for the Advancement of Science are among the professional bodies that have resisted mandatory labeling, since there is as yet no conclusive scientific evidence of harm. In 2102, Californians voted against Proposition 37, which would have made such labeling mandatory. The following year, Connecticut passed the first GMO labeling law in the country; however, the application is dependent on the adoption of similar measures in other states until their summed population equals at least 20 million. Maine, which passed a similar labeling law in 2014, has included the same trigger mechanism.

European Union authorities have instead tried to control the penetration of GMOs into the Union’s territories by applying the so-called precautionary principle: GMOs are not acceptable until it is definitely proved that they are not harmful to human health and the environment. This approach has been met with very high approval ratings from European citizens, a majority of whom are extremely apprehensive about anything potentially genetically modified. In 1999, the EU established a de facto moratorium pending the adoption of legislation on the matter. In 2001, however, the EU began regulating the experimental release of GMOs in the environment and the measures to avoid contamination with conventional and organic crops. In 2003, the EU also legislated on genetically modified food and feed, imposing

labels that disclose the presence of genetically modified ingredients when the content is above 0.9 percent, which is considered a reasonable level of “accidental presence.” Nonetheless, it is not necessary to label meats from animals fed with genetically modified grains. After a US complaint ruled that EU restrictions on genetically engineered crops violated international trade agreements, and under pressure from the World Trade Organization (WTO), the EU lifted the moratorium in 2004 and passed regulations to test and introduce GMOs. These decisions led to the approval of genetically modified maize, cotton, oilseed rape, potatoes, soybeans, and sugar beet varieties, and allowed GMO feed. However, Austria, France, Greece, Hungary, Germany, and Luxembourg have banned GMOs from their territories, invoking the so-called “safety clause” included in the 2001 directive. Moreover, a few administrative regions in Spain, Italy, Great Britain, Belgium, and Greece, as well as in member states that banned GMOs, have created a network, based on a political agreement with no binding juridical status, to safeguard their agriculture policies against the dangers connected with the introduction of GMOs.

While individuals, local communities, and whole countries fight to keep GMO ingredients—dangerous precisely because they are invisible—from invading their food systems and their own bodies, crucial issues about intellectual property ownership at times do not get the attention they deserve. There is still no conclusive evidence that GMO crops are dangerous to health (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2016). However, there is plenty of proof that the ownership of most GMO patents by a handful of large companies in Western countries is skewing not only the accessibility of GMO crops but also the research agenda. The Global South has seen research and development budgets in agriculture slashed as international monetary organizations imposed structural adjustment policies in exchange for debt refinancing. As a consequence, most of the least-developed and developing nations—with noticeable exceptions such as China and Brazil—cannot invest resources in GMO crops that would actually address their farmers’ needs (Fukuda-Parr 2007). In-

stead, seeds engineered in the Global North to meet the needs of large agribusiness and technological farming flood the global market, with disastrous consequences for small rural communities worldwide.

ECOLOGICAL DANGERS

Language focusing on siege, dangerous invaders, and defensive battles tends to be particularly prevalent when the damage to agriculture and food production is massive. In fact, plant or animal species that are not native to a specific place but rather were introduced accidentally or deliberately by humans and spread to the point of disrupting or devastating whole ecological systems are called “invasive species.” They usually reproduce and grow quickly and display high dispersal ability, increasing the perception of a biological invasion. Japanese arrowroot, also known as kudzu, first became popular as an ornamental vine in the second half of the nineteenth century and was touted by the US Soil Erosion Service, in the years before World War II, as a way for farmers in the Southeast to limit erosion on slopes (Forseth and Innis 2004). Only later the plant was classified as a weed. Asian carp were introduced into Southern fish farm ponds in the 1970s and quickly spread upstream in the Mississippi River (Chick 2001). They have destroyed native species, and at present great efforts are being made to stop the fish from invading the Great Lakes.

Sometimes the threat is less visible, as in the case of the contemporary diffusion of *xylella* bacterium in Apulia, Italy, which has hit olive trees (Latza Nadeau 2016). A hundred and fifty years ago, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the *phylloxera* aphid almost wiped out European wine production (Campbell 2014). Interestingly, at the time the solution was to graft European varieties onto American rootstocks, as the latter were resistant to the parasite. This caused some anxiety in the industry. As local grape varieties survived thanks to foreign roots, their connection to tradition and their original area of production became murkier than it used to be. Moreover, wines from France’s North African colonies, particularly Algeria, and New World countries, which had not been affected by *phylloxera*,

were compensating for the reduced production in Europe during the worst years of the disease. They were qualitatively acceptable, used well-known varieties of European origin, and often carried familiar denominations in European languages. The reaction was what food historian Rachel Laudan has defined as “the French *terroir* strategy,” which over time developed into the Appellations d’Origine Contrôlée (AOC) classification: a set of regulations that seemed to offer producers differentiation and some protection for their wines, at least in terms of naming rights and specification of their origin (Laudan 2004, 133–44.). While the concept of *terroir* itself indicates the unique quality and flavor characteristics of food that can be attributed to climate, geography, soil, and human historical interaction with them, it has also been used as a way to increase pride in local productions and to fend off the invasion not only of foreign goods but also of the merchandise from large national and international food industries.

Pathogens and diseases can also affect animal husbandry, causing panic among citizens and creating international tensions. In November 1986, the first official case of Mad Cow Disease, or Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE), was detected in British cattle. The cause of the epidemic was identified as cattle feed made out of animal carcasses and offal, especially sheep. The epidemic had actually originated in the late 1970s, when probusiness government policies introduced deregulation in the meat-rendering industry, allowing many usable parts of dead animals to become supplements for livestock diet without being steamed at high temperatures or sterilized using organic solvents. The result was that the infectious agents—in this case prions—could survive in the fodder and be transmitted to cows and humans eating their meat (when it affects humans, the disease is called Creutzfeld-Jakob disease). The first cases of BSE were observed as early as 1984, but in subsequent years attempts were made to keep outbreaks under wraps in support of the beef industry.

In 1989, the European Union imposed an embargo on British exportations of veal aged more than six months, and in 1994 it banned the use of fodder deriving from livestock. In 1996, the Union

voted for a total ban of beef from the United Kingdom, whereupon the British Government chose to kill cows used for beef who were older than 30 months and to destroy their carcasses. Nevertheless, British beef was still being smuggled all over Europe, and the scandal exploded in the summer of 1997. After two years, the situation seemed to ease and the European Union lifted the embargo on beef from the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, France and Germany refused to comply. At the same time, another epidemic, this time of foot-and-mouth disease, started affecting cattle, sheep, and pigs all over Europe, increasing the general panic, although the virus only rarely makes humans sick. In July 2001, the European Union enforced new regulations that allowed only the use of chickens and pigs in cattle feed. Further, all meat imported from other countries was to be inspected and certified.

The Mad Cow epidemic and other worries had become so important to public opinion that European institutions felt they had to take a clear stand. In its “White Paper on Food Safety” issued in January 2000, the Commission of the European Communities—the executive body of the European Union—proposed the establishment of an independent European food authority as the most appropriate response to the need to guarantee a high level of food safety. Two years later, in January 2002, Regulation No. 178 was passed establishing the European Authority for Food Security. The Authority, the regulation states, constitutes an independent scientific point of reference in evaluating risks and guaranteeing the regular functioning of the internal market. It formulates pronouncements about scientific matters that are objects of controversy and helps to manage any future crisis at the Union level. The Authority is not supposed to have any enforcement power, but it passes its recommendations to the European Commission. Nevertheless, it is granted an autonomous right of communication in order to provide information directly to the public, although in case of emergency it must coordinate its communication with the Commission and the member states. Although the structure of the organization, including its staff and finances, were

all laid out in the 2002 regulation, it took until December 2003 for a meeting of the heads of government of the EU member states to assign the offices of the newly created Authority to the city of Parma.

The avian flu that swept the world from 2003 to 2006 constitutes another great example of how the fear of invisible invaders in the food system can have an impact on society at large (Sipress 2009). In Italy, for instance, the pandemic was used to stigmatize the food and restaurants of Asian immigrants. Consumers were afraid that goods originating in Asia could be contaminating. These fears were built on the widespread conviction that Chinese tend to use imported frozen, low quality, cheap food from their lands of origin, which is supposed to explain the low prices of their dishes. At the time, Chinese entrepreneurs had to turn their restaurants into pizzerias to ensure their survival. Many went out of business and were sold to Italians and new waves of ethnic entrepreneurs.

THE STAKES FOR GLOBAL TRADE

Other international tensions focus on the presence of growth hormones in meat, with public opinion and civil society putting pressure on governments in trade negotiations. The EU passed a regulation that not only prohibited their use within the Union but also barred imports of meats with hormones from third countries. Most Europeans fear the possible negative impact of hormones on health and, in particular, on the growth of children. As such substances are invisible, citizens expect that their government will defend them from any surreptitious and unauthorized invasions of their bodies. The US and Canada brought a complaint to the WTO, which in 1997 ruled that the EU was not in line with the WTO Agreement on Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS, discussed at length below). The EU appealed, and the WTO appellate body decided that the regulation was not acceptable because it should have been based on an assessment of the risks to human health. While the US argued that the level of hormones used in meat was not high enough to be dangerous, the EU mandated a new assessment, and in 1999 an independent scien-

tific advisory body concluded that no acceptable daily intake could be determined for any of the growth hormones. In 2003 an EU directive confirmed the prohibition of the use of the substances in farm animal husbandry. Canada and the US retaliated by imposing a total of \$125 million in extra annual tariffs on goods coming from the EU. In these and many other cases of international disputes, we can see how issues of food safety are often inflected with nationalist language and ideas, which in turn cover economic and trade interests. This observation, of course, is not meant to deny the actual relevance of danger in a globalized world. However, legitimate health concerns often turn into calls for action to stop the penetration—or get rid of the presence—of invasive others.

Trade wars and ideological stances are often wrapped in a politically correct exterior. At times they find fertile terrain in debates about issues of global commerce, supporting and justifying the SPS rules and other international food safety regulations. Although their stated—and absolutely important—goal is the protection of the health of humans, animals, and plants, measures based on the SPS agreement are not infrequently used in trade wars, resulting in discrimination or disguised restrictions that would seemingly run counter to the principles of free commerce supported and promoted by the WTO. In fact, the SPS agreement includes procedures that in practice can support attempts to stop the import of foreign foods. To avoid harm to the health of humans, plants, animals, and whole ecological systems, WTO member countries have recourse to actions that range from information requirements on importable goods (labeling or control on voluntary claims) to requiring exporting countries to adhere to technical specifications and standards affecting process and products. In extreme cases, countries can enforce total or partial import bans. However, in order to apply these measures without causing disputes and incurring sanctions (which the WTO Dispute Settlement Body can impose), a country must provide sufficient scientific evidence for their urgency. Such evidence is supposed to be based on the assessment of ascertainable food-borne risks and the likelihood of the spread of diseases and pests.

The assessments inevitably reflect the risk-management policies of each country, which are likely to determine acceptable levels of risk and appropriate levels of protection in very different ways. As a consequence, the selection of appropriate measures among those allowed by the SPS agreement depends very much on social perception of risks as well as political and economic interests. Consumer concerns, moral preferences, and cultural value judgments all play an important role in determining whether a country can or cannot accept certain levels of risk. There are some ground rules meant to avoid foul play—for instance, risk assessments based on international standards, such as those determined by the Codex Alimentarius, are always acceptable. The 1962 Codex Alimentarius (Latin for “food law”), which is constantly revised and updated by an expert advisory committee administered jointly by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN and the World Health Organization, determines worldwide safety standards for internationally traded food products. These standards may cover topics as diverse as the residue of veterinary drugs and pesticides, chemical and microbiological contamination, food additives, and hygiene.

Although such standards have proved crucial in terms of securing food safety at the global level, they also constitute indirect barriers to trade for less-developed countries. In general, Global North countries tend to apply much stricter standards, and they have the financial, administrative, and logistic means to enforce them. At times, the costs of compliance for Global South countries are steep; furthermore, production and marketing practices may not allow for the supply chains to ensure the necessary controls. Even when producers and exporters comply with the international standards, which are extremely intricate and frequently updated—and require a high degree of expertise to apply—local authorities may not have the capacity to provide certification of compliance. Very often, Western wholesalers and retailers impose their own standards on producers as part of the legal arrangements that form the backbone of the contract farming phenomenon: these foreign traders agree to buy farmers’ entire har-

vests as long as those farmers comply with requirements that range from safety to dates of delivery and even the appearance of the produce. In these cases, the institutions in charge of trade make sure that the imported goods comply with international standards—the invasive foreign food is domesticated to Western standards directly in its place of production and does not even pass the borders of the exporting country if it is not considered on a par with the needs and preferences of faraway buyers and consumers.

CONCLUSION

Defensive discourses and practices built around food-related identities—from the local to the national—can become very powerful weapons with which to exclude elements that might be perceived as unfamiliar, transforming them into a threatening menace. Difference is then considered a liability, a force that can increase the perceived instability of individual bodies and whole societies. On the other hand, even the fairly uninformed citizen is aware of the constant exchange among the diverse cultures that form a supposed “global mosaic.” For better or worse, the destinies of local, regional, and national identities are deeply connected, especially in a world where global exchanges have become the norm. Food plays a paramount role in the encounters of different identities. Deeply entangled with people’s most basic needs, desires, and drives, food resonates in intimate ways in everybody’s mental and emotional worlds.

Many global phenomena, such as pollution, endangered biodiversity, food-related diseases, genetically modified foods, famines, and unequal distribution of resources, just to mention a few, seem to threaten not only the body social but also individuals. The survival of the individual body is at stake, the very body whose frontiers are constantly threatened by fashionable diets, changing standards of beauty, and cosmetic surgery. At the same time, individuals feel exposed to economic forces they do not understand, ineffable powers that seem to run world politics, and technological transformations that are often too complex to grasp in all their hi-tech implications.

In this fast-paced reality, changes are constantly imposed on people who end up finding respite in cultural and social dynamics that reassure them about who they are and their place in the world. It is often easier to focus on what hits closer to home: what we ingest and what physically becomes part of us. As individual health emerges as an apparently controllable goal, any perceived threat—especially when invisible—generates high levels of anxieties. Viruses, pests, GMOs, hormones, pesticides, fertilizers, and any kind of impurity can elicit strong reactions. It is not surprising then that politics often returns to strategies that regard food as one of the crucial—albeit shifting—ingredients for ensuring recognizable identities.

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