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**Title of paper: What is Good to Eat? The Big Question of our Times**

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**Abstract**

Fernand Braudel points out the big centrality of food in the historical process of social constitution. When each human group in History delimited which natural objects were “good to eat” and which ones were not, that became one of the fundamental cultural act. Nowadays, food has gained a special centrality again, but it is a quite different one. 2008 has been named the Year of the Big Hunger but this was only one expression, perhaps the most terrible, of a bigger picture, consequence of a long list of problems that modern food systems have accumulated over the last century. Does the new centrality of food derived from its crises points to mankind’s current incapacity to provide sufficient and healthy food for everyone? It is not difficult to find evidence of this incapacity, as the current academic and public dispute about health effects of some foods, and the numerous and sometimes contradictory literature published. This state of confusion related to food doesn’t only concern rich consumers. In recent years, an issue related to possible future hazardous results of hunger-fighting programs in developing countries has emerged. In capitalist societies, who has the right to determine what’s is good to eat? Nutrition science? Social sciences? National and international food regulatory authorities? Consumer organizations? Individuals, through their free choice? In these conflictive, contradictory and messy state, identified as a situation of gastro-anomie, it is necessary to go deeper into the capitalist transformation of food relations, that is, the capitalist appropriation of the plants of civilization. This permits to identify the material conditions that gave rise to the increasing inability to define in Social sciences and in society as a whole what is good to eat. Food’s mercantile transformation, the abstraction process of its qualitative features and inner, essentially contradictory character, provides the conditions to understand capitalist shifts from a quality concern and questions addressing the substantive "what" and "why" to a concern about abstract quantity.

**Key words: material culture, food crises, capitalism,**

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## Introduction: the Plants of Civilization and the Past Centrality of Food

After more than two decades of investigation, French Historian Fernand Braudel published in 1967 the first volume of *Civilization and Capitalism 15<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> Century*. There, Braudel introduced the study of material life and its place in History and Social Development (Braudel, 1977: 7-8). One of the most interesting findings of this perspective is that for Braudel, food distinguishes from the rest of the elements of material life. Since Neolithic Revolution (5<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> millennium), the different forms in which human groups dealt with their alimentation were at the heart of each developing cultural identity and, literally, cultivated along many centuries. In this way, in ancient times, food had a central role; it was an active element and departure point of the different humanities and of the varied social world production.

Whereas the list of edible objects in Nature is large, not all of them have the same relevance to social world construction and reproduction. Each Neolithic Revolution accomplished, a very long process of adaptation experiments, was anchored to a specific plant, a privileged food: the plants of civilization. The developments of productive agricultural capacities focused in cultivating, domesticating and some times producing these civilization plants. In general, these were complex carbohydrates, such as cereals or tubers. For this author, cereals would be the big protagonists of food revolution, but he insists this also revolutionized and determined many other aspects of social life, beyond food. In this sense, Braudel identified the maize, the rice and the wheat civilizations:

*Three of these plants were brilliantly successful: wheat, rice, and maize.... the plants of civilization, they have profoundly organized man's (sic) material and sometimes his spiritual life, to the point where they have become almost ineradicable structures (Braudel, 1979: 107).*

With this analysis key, Braudel explored specific food and social characteristics, which were developed around these three cereals. Their influence in the organization of the different food cultures, like the complementary system of wheat-cattle raised in Europe; the vertical, stable and authoritarian political system of rice civilizations; or the complex cosmology centered in maize in the American civilization. Also, Braudel explored how these different cereal-based civilizations created distinctions within and outside societies<sup>1</sup>, based on food related issues.

With this term, plants of civilization, Braudel points out the big centrality of food in the historical process of social constitution. This weightiness of material culture does not have to be mistaken with vulgar materialism, mere physiological survival. As many anthropologists and Marxists have pointed out, when each human group in History delimited which natural objects were “good to eat” and which ones were not, although they did not necessarily represent a hazard to the human body, that became a fundamental cultural fact (Flandrin, 1987:10; Echeverría, 2001). A recent study with the Banwia indigenous group in Brazil's Amazon shows how food is at the center of a complex and ambivalent cosmological relationship with alterity (animals, natural forces and other indigenous and non-indigenous groups), at times dangerous, albeit

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the poor's bread and the rich's bread in Europe or the cultural difference between *Mesoamericanos* and *Chichimecas*, based on maize culture. In another cases, different kinds of food were used to make the opposition between civilized and “barbarian” (Carneiro, 2003: 817).

indispensable to life's community reproduction: *moving between the boundaries of humanity and the domain of alterity is a way of renewing and enriching society, but it is likewise the source of death, sickness, and chaos* (Garnelo, 2007: 209). The identification of what is "good to eat" delimits and also shapes the material and spiritual relationships with Nature, the ideas and practices about the human body and its nature, and the social relations within groups and among them.

As a fundamental cultural act, the determination of what is considered food has never been a result of a nutritional rationality, but neither of a dangerous and suicidal experiment. History has shown that around these civilization plants and its derived products (bread, tortilla, etc.) a set of other foods or complementary foods would be organized in a more or less coherent form, whose function was to provide the principal flavor to the monotony of a complex carbohydrate and other nutritional substances necessary. Sydney Mintz stands out among these supplemental foods salad dressings, chilies, animal products, legumes, and fats, some herbs, fungi, algae and seasonings (Mintz, 1996: 37-38).

### **The New Centrality of Food: Food Crises, Hunger and Illness**

Nowadays, food has gained a special centrality again. But it is a quite different one. In recent years, food acquired public, academic and private interest because of the huge crises that surrounded it. Obviously, the antique centrality of food, shown by Braudel, does not mean that a past food paradise was lost with the arrival of capitalism. That is to say, the central role of food in ancient civilizations doesn't have to be interpreted as a value judgment. Food related problems existed then, but what our societies face today is, as it will be attempted to demonstrate here, of a very different kind. A problem related to the inversion in social priorities specific to capitalist societies, as it will be explained further on.

Braudel in the same book accounts that since the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the cultural material of civilizations all around the world was subjected to a big transformation: the capitalist material civilization, if possible to say, was in process of worldwide expansion. A well-registered phenomenon of change, exchange and flows of foodstuff between different civilizations and continents increased in an unprecedented way (Braudel, 1979; Mintz, 1996; Carneiro, 2003). The actual food experience, at least in the urban context, has become a very complex activity. Every day, individuals face a sequence of food decisions and actions related to what, when, how, where, how much and with whom to eat. Today, individuals are confronted with vast possibilities, just think of the huge shelves of super-markets or cities' streets taken over by countless food stalls and prepared meals. An apparently abundance and universalization seems to characterize contemporary food systems.

*Food is a complex case. Its consumption is universal, mundane and polyvalent. Everyone eats; most eat several times a day without much reflection... Also, in principle, it is markedly ephemeral. Once I have eaten the contents of my refrigerator, I could go and buy a completely different set of items. I could eat traditional Cantonese meals in May, junk food in June, and be vegetarian in July* (Warde, 1997: 180).

Nevertheless, this apparent abundance and assortment in the contemporary food system is not the origin of the new centrality gained by food. On the contrary, 2008 has been named the Year of the Big Hunger (Magdoff, 2008). International food prices increased

and the consequences were ferocious: 44 million people fell into hunger situation (Beddington *et al.*, 2012: 16). But this increase in people in hunger situation was an expression, maybe the most appalling, of a bigger picture, consequence of a long list of problems that modern food systems had accumulated over the last century. Beyond the increase in food prices, the world is facing a more complex food crisis.

According to the Global Nutrition Report (2015): 795 million people are hungry, 1.9 billion of adults are overweight or obese, and 2 billion people are micronutrient deficient. In sum, one out of three people on the planet is malnourished (undernourished or overweight) and 45% of countries face the double burden of malnutrition (under nutrition combined with overweight, obesity, and/or nutrition-related non-communicable diseases) (IFPRI, 2015). Overweight and obesity together are the fifth death risk worldwide. Under these categories, 44% of diabetes type II, 23% heart disease and between 7% and 40% of some cancers are inputted (WHO, 2012). These chronic-diseases are nowadays the principal death cause worldwide (WHO, 2010). A recent report of Global Panel concludes that poor diets pose a greater risk to health than unsafe sex, alcohol, drugs and tobacco use combined (GLOPAN, 2016).

The last UN Food Right Relator, De Schutter, concluded in 2014 that the existing food system has failed and needs urgent reform (De Schutter, 2014: 4). His final report resumes very well the current deep food problems: the insufficient efforts against hunger that were almost obliterated after food prices increases; and an inefficient production pattern, inheritor of the Green Revolution, facing its consequences on Nature and power distribution through the food system. He also recognized failures in market patterns of food distribution, which favored already well-off consumers and power concentration along the food system, as well as in food consumption patterns, for example, meat consumption and processed food.

Before this scenario, is it plausible to admit that contemporary societies seem to have a serious problem to define what is “good to eat”? Does the new centrality of food derived from its crises points to mankind’s incapacity to provide sufficient and healthy food for everyone?

### **The Big Question of Our Times: What is Good to Eat?**

A recent research in the Unites States found that each day, every person makes about 15 conscious food related decisions and nearly 200 unconsciousness ones (Wansink y Sobal, 2007: 115). These findings seem to indicate, as the article’s title suggests, that eating is a mindless practice. Another research shows that in a nationally representative sample of 3,000 U.S adults, 75% of them alleged that they have a healthy diet. Further analysis of their practices showed the opposite. What is happening, asks the reporter. Are Americans confused about what constitutes a healthy diet? (Aubrey and Godoy, 2016).

This kind of evidence can be completed with some of the actual academic and public dispute on health effects of some foods, and the numerous and sometimes contradictory literature published. We have, for example: the long and complex debate on GMOs, whose most recent expression includes the manifesto signed by 113 Nobel laureates in favor of the cultivation of GMO foods in Africa to end hunger and explicitly criminalizes activities against GMOs (SPA, 2016); and the relationship between hyper-processed food consumption and epidemic obesity (PAOHA, 2015; Groden, 2015). More examples include: the health effects of red meat, especially after the WHO negative statement on the subject (WHO, 2015). Last year, a debate about what should express the "natural" denotation in food emerged among Americans food authorities, which led to the FDA to open a forum to hear the views of the consumers.

The result, as Marion Nestle signaled, only showed the great confusion that exists around food characteristics (Nestle, 2015). Or the most recent battle between sugar and fat advocates on who is to blame for the obesity epidemic (O'Connor, 2016). Almost every day appears new, and sometimes contradictory, information about the health effects of different foodstuff, as artificial flavors or colorants, food preservatives, hormones and antibiotics used on cattle, dairy or gluten allergies, and the list expands constantly.

At first glance, it would seem that this state of confusion or ambiguity related to food only concerns rich consumers or at least consumers in no-hunger situation. But it is not really the case. In recent years, an issue related to the possible future hazardous results of hunger-fighting programs in developing countries have emerged. For example, in Latin American over the last decades, 21 countries have implemented conditional cash-transfer programs that benefit more than 113 millions of people, which represent 20% of the regional population (FAO, 2014: 11). In spite of the significant achievements, a problematic situation can be acknowledged. Brazil and Mexico are emblematic cases.

In Brazil, the worldwide renowned program *Fome Zero* (Zero Hunger) relieved from hunger approximately 20 million Brazilians in the ten years period 2003-2013. Nevertheless, a recent study on the effects of *Fome Zero* on food consumption patterns revealed that the food habits of most of the beneficiaries resulted in a significant raise in the consumption of highly-processed foods and foods high in sugar, salt and fat (Menezes, 2008: 107); food patterns associated to overweight and obesity.

Something similar happened in Mexico. In this country, conditional cash-transfer programs began in 1997, and by 2008 they still accomplished important results. The percentage of Mexicans living in extreme poverty went from 37% in 1996 to 14% in 2006. With the raise of international food prices, all of these gains were lost (Coneval, 2012). Because of this, the federal government recently introduced a new program against hunger named “Cruzada contra el Hambre” (“The Crusade against Hunger”). One of the program’s objectives is to establish community eateries, but after three years of application, the results have not been the anticipated (Coneval, 2016). The main objective of this crusade is food access, not nutrition; plus a questionable partnership with big agrofood corporations, such as Nestlé and Pepsi-Co (EPC, 2013). Thus, it appears among the most important criticisms. The crusade has generated problems because: 1) in some cases, the menus and food offered by the program do not correspond to beneficiaries’ food and cultural habits (Coneval, 2016: 55); and 2) in other cases, the food offered is highly processed, with high contents of sugar, salt or fat (La Jornada 2/2/2016).

It is true; these two programs are contextualized within the global tendency to obesity epidemic. But this should not lead to naturalized obesity and the diseases related to it as an unavoidable output or future, as “diseases of civilization”. Yet, is important to acknowledge the problematic question we deal with between the two faces of malnutrition, on the one side is hunger fight, but in the other, future health consequences of obesity. Again, the issue seems to be situated in what is good to eat. The question now remains in our capitalist societies: who should or who has the right to determine what is good to eat?

### **Who Has the Right to Determine What is Good to Eat?**

The first answer that comes to mind is Nutrition science. As Marion Nestle affirms, the nutritional advice about diets has not changed in more than 50 years and it even seems

so obvious: *“Eat more fruit and vegetables? Nothing could be more self-evident”* (Nestle, 2007: 29). As Social sciences have proved, our food practices have little to do with nutritional rationality. Food practices have been considered a very complex activity, influenced by many socio-economic factors (Furst et al., 1996). Although the huge quantity of literature about food in different Social sciences, it is possible to identify the existence of a muteness sometimes created by noise and confusing information about what is good to eat. For example, in Orthodox Economic science, the formal logic mainstream lacks any inquiring about the qualitative dimensions of individuals’ choices. Market equilibrium based on prices movement and rational choice is, in essence, a quantitative equilibrium: the match between supply and demand is given in terms of prices and quantities. The qualitative equilibrium, what really matters to food consumption in light of current food crises, is supposed to be a certain and obvious consequence of the first equilibrium, based on the consumer sovereignty axiom. In consequence, it does not make sense to inquire about food patterns as long as rational choice and market competition are working well. Therefore, the food available in markets is what consumers dictated through their choices. From an opposite analytical position, Consumption Sociology pays the same reluctant attention to qualitative characteristics of consumption objects. For example, in Campbell’s theory of modern consumption, the qualitative characteristics of consumption objects are secondary, in view of what is imaginarily passive to project by the individuals. Consumption objects become “dream material”: *thus the need for food may be satisfied in a variety of ways, say, by eating a hamburger, a Chinese meal or a chocolate bar, and this range of possibilities allows for desire and preference to be expressed.* (Campbell, 1998: 241-24)

Another possible answer is to be found in national and international food regulatory authorities. Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, food regulation was mainly responsibility of national authorities but in the last decades, and with the growth of international food trade, the necessity of an international regulation emerged. This resulted in the constitution of FAO’s Codex Alimentarius<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless, since 1990 this kind of institutions have experimented a lost in legitimacy, as Nestle (2007) and Portilho et al., (2011) concluded for the cases of USA’s and Europe’s authorities, and Sklair (2002) for the Codex Alimentarius. The causes of this lack of legitimacy are complex, but include conflict of interest inherent to the authorities’ constitution. For example, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and FAO’s Codex Alimentarius both have a twofold and sometimes opposing objective of promoting food production/trade while protecting consumers interests (Sklair, 2002; Nestle, 2007). Portilho et al. (2011) add the effect of the numerous scandals referred to foods that were available on the markets but happened to be unsuitable to be eaten and its consumption lead to death or disease<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, Warde identified this lack of expert legitimacy as a result of contradictory information from different sources:

*Nowadays, assessments of risk made by experts are frequently publicly challenged by other experts...well-publicized disagreements, and apparent revisions to previously accepted beliefs, tend to undermine popular*

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<sup>2</sup> In a context where liberalization of agriculture was a key topic of multilateral negotiations, it was important to delegate to international bodies of experts food safety measures, with the aim that these would not be used as non-tariff barriers.

<sup>3</sup> These authors refer specially to the mad cow disease scandal in England 1996, as the cause that withdrew confidence from food regulatory authorities and the shift of the discussion of food related issues to the more informal field of opinions and debate between consumers, independent experts, reporters, etc. (Portilho et al., 2001: 100).

*confidence in official recommendation...A misleading impression may then be given that each and every view is equally valid and that any advice is substantively groundless, a mere matter of opinion or faith (Warde, 1997: 83)*

As this situation is accentuated, two opposed positions have arisen. On one hand, the denominated *foodies*, consumers who are self-considered experts on food and that sometimes conform social organizations to press, politically, on the course and regulation of the current food system, especially in developed countries. This is what Portilho identifies as the politicization of consumption and private life (Portilho et al., 2001: 101-103). On the other hand and as a critical response to these consumer organizations, stand the free market advocates, who accuse foodies to building a *food fascism* in fact, looking to get into the table of all households and impose what is right or wrong to eat: *The debate is nasty because our freedom is at stake... the self-proclaimed saviors of the "food system, who want to make decisions for us" ... The food elite has found the problem underlying our modern food dilemmas, and it is nothing short of capitalism and individual freedom (Lusk, 2013: 72-75)*

### **Food as Commodity and the Necessity of Capitalism's Deep Critique**

In capitalist societies exists scientific research about food and food consumption determinants, information on food characteristics, and well established institutions with the objective to regulate food, consumer organizations demanding a better food regulation and free market advocates, for whom market is the best way to determine what is good to eat. Why, then, does it seem that the current food system is still messy in terms of incapacity to define what is good to eat? And why health problems related to food are one of the most important present problems?

Claus Fischler, at the end of 1970, diagnosed modern society as dominated by gastro-anomie: *El alimento, para hablar con propiedad, se ha convertido en un objeto sin historia conocida, en un artefacto que flota en un vacío casi sideral, entre pasado y porvenir, a la vez amenazante y fascinante (Fischler: 2010; 10)*. For this author, within Durkheim tradition, societies would have lost its capacity to define what is good to eat as a result of the collapse of tradition and direct societal control. Capitalism transformation would have buried the validity of the called collective consciousness (group of feelings, ideas, beliefs and values), which was the reference for individuals' actions, food habits included. In Durkheim, it is not clear whether this lack of reference is temporal, waiting to the emergence of a new reference system or permanent (López, 2015).

Although the term of gastro-anomie is interesting, it is possible to achieve a better comprehension about this loss of reference related to food, looking from the point of view of Karl Marx's capitalism critique. Capitalism's big transformation of our social world is not reduced to, in the case of food, an increase in quantity and assortment, although this is one of its most important expressions. The most elementary novelty of capitalism is that all objects of social wealth are transformed into merchandise. It is not a novelty that food is a commodity in our societies. Many authors have studied and criticized this fact. The Food Regime Perspective has made relevant contributions to this topic. For these authors, the chief characteristic of capitalist food relations is that they are socially dis-embedded (Campbell, 2009:310). Nevertheless, the relation of this and the question pointed out here on the definition of what is good to eat has not received enough attention.

What are the implications of the fact that foods are commodities? And what is the relationship between *socially dis-embedded food relations* and the capacity to define what is good to eat? First, obviously, food as merchandise means that food is mostly acquired in markets<sup>4</sup>. But this simple and quotidian fact means, from an historical perspective, that a big change in the status of food within society has taken place.

All of the social qualitative characteristics and roles attributed to food by Braudel, which include but are not limited to nourishment questions, are now “accompanied” by another special property: to be capable to be exchanged in markets. What is specific to the capitalist society is that what was central to social conformation and development, in our example the plants of civilization, now is nothing but *material depositories* of abstract-value’s “civilization” logic. What was an end in its self has become a medium to an abstract finality. This change is what was meant as fundamental priorities inversion or, in Marxist terms, estrangement.

Related to our question, it is possible to identify two crucial consequences for food. First, the value dimension of commodities, the capability of exchange, requires that all of the qualitative character of objects must be abstracted and reduced into a socially abstract quality. Marx does not do this reduction theoretically; instead it is a real process of abstraction developed day by day by the market. This abstraction really means indifference toward the specific content, toward the sensuous qualities of objects (McNally, 2011: 124). In fact, it can be understood as a process of progressive dematerialization of capitalist wealth (Carcanholo, 2011:69). In the past, for example in cereals civilizations, the important was the “what”, “how” and “for whom” of wealth production and consumption. Now, the center of social reproduction is an abstract “how much” (Marx, 2003 (1867): 56). From the point of view of value, all products are the same, the plants of civilization, and with these foods, have lost their centrality. To capitalist social reproduction, it is indifferent not only the qualitative characteristics of food produced and consumed, but also if “what” is produced are foodstuffs, arms, or combustible. The only thing that matters is the continuous realization of value in markets.

Second, as *material depositories* of value, all the qualitative characteristics of objects, what is resumed by the term use-value, cannot disappear; it is vital for value realization. This relationship of indifference and dependence is the first expression of the essential contradictory character of capitalism. Commodities should be realized first as value, their priority is to be sold, before anyone can consume them or realize them as use-value. But in order to be sold, a commodity has to demonstrate that it satisfies a social necessity, despite this property is only demonstrable by exchange on the market (Marx, 2003 (1867): 105). It seems to be an unsolvable problem or an impossible situation. This isn’t a problem of Marx’s theory, but a contradiction present in our reality, and that specially points to the delimitation of what is good to eat.

In a society of private producers who are indifferent in relation to others, it is not possible to know *a priori* (before market moment) what is socially needed because the unique social moment of private owners is at the moment of exchange. The anarchical movement of market prices is the way in which is realized the connection between what is needed and what is produced. As Durkheim has identified, with capitalism direct social dependence relations are blurred, but for Marx the result isn’t a vacuum of social reference rather than a new form, an objective one, of social dependence. Market

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<sup>4</sup> For example, in rural and urban contexts of Latin-American countries, the share of purchased food in total food consumption is around 60 and 70 percent. The remaining part could come from public or private donations (such as the Mexican program presented before) or self-production, according to FAO’s Food Security Indicators from household surveys.



dependence, as a social compulsion that forces everyone to buy and sell goods to survive is actually a reciprocal and multilateral dependence between mutually indifferent individuals (Marx, 2011 [1857-58]: 111). It is an objective dependence, mediated and realized through objects in market: *Os indivíduos são agora dominados por abstrações ao passo que antes dependiam uns dos outros* (Marx, 2011 [1857-58]: 112).

Social reproduction, and with this the establishing of what is good to eat, is not long depending of, or centered on a plant of civilization but in the *community of things* in the market. This is the commodity fetishism. Even though the reproduction process of value is in principle indifferent in relation to use-value, social reproduction is at last realized, in an objective, chaotic and accidental way. Social reproduction is thus alienated: *Su propio movimiento social posee para ellos la forma de un movimiento de cosas bajo cuyo control se encuentran, en lugar de controlarlas.* (Marx, 2003(1867): 91). The fundamental cultural act to define “what”, “when”, “how much” and “for whom” of wealth production, and “for what social necessities” is realized in an estranged form, as a relation between mercantile objects.

The merchandise’s fetishism and the estranged character of social reproduction in capitalism do not need to be interpreted as a lack of information or a situation of plenty ignorance. Marx himself recognized that this estranged way of determining what is socially needed leads to develop all kinds of communication and information systems. In a society where all individuals are compelled to buy and sell goods, information about what others are producing or needing becomes vital. However, the development of this informational mechanism proves that social reproduction happens externally, estrangely, to each individual (Marx, 2011 [1857-58]:109) .

## Final Considerations

This primary analysis permits to identify the material conditions that gave rise to the increasing inability to define in Social sciences and in society as a whole what is good to eat. Food’s mercantile transformation, the abstraction process of its qualitative properties, and its inner and essentially contradictory character, provide the conditions to understand capitalist shifts from a quality concern and questions addressing the substantive “what” and “why” to a concern about abstract quantity. And also, why despite of, and to some extent because of, the abundant information available it still is a confusing area for individuals and difficult for society as a whole to delimit what is good to eat and what is not.

Food as a commodity is just the beginning of a deeper and more complex analysis. This is not an invitation to return to the fundamentalist and deterministic Marxism. It is a request to take seriously the contradictory aspects of our society that even appear normal or natural today, as the fact that food is a commodity, which reunites in potential all of the contradictions and conflicts that we are facing nowadays.

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