

Introduction

The Unpostponable Call for a Change of the Production/Consumption Paradigm in Times of Permanent Crisis

While I write the introduction to this book, Europe is being swept by a wave of revolts led by farmers and producers. In France, tractors occupy the outskirts in protest against new taxes on fossil fuels and rising production prices. Similarly, in Germany, protests by over 10,000 farmers erupt as the government decides to reintroduce previously suspended agricultural taxes and cut subsidies on diesel fuel for agricultural vehicles. In Poland, farmers, aboard tractors, have taken to the streets to protest against certain measures that appear to harm local agriculture. In recent years, farmers across Western Europe have become increasingly vocal in expressing their opposition to environmental protection measures they deem too costly. Notably, this turmoil against the expenses associated with European Union (EU) greener farming policies predate both the pandemic and the energy crisis, leaving many farmers struggling financially. The Netherlands witnessed particularly strong reactions when a 2019 court ruling on nitrogen emissions (accounting for about 4% of global greenhouse gas emissions, according to FAO) sparked ongoing protests immediately labeled as farmers' resistance against government attempts to shut down farms and decrease the number of animals. In Belgium, similar challenges last March resulted in convoys of tractors congesting the EU quarter in Brussels. In Ireland, while the protests have been smaller, dairy farmers upset about nitrogen restrictions marched with their cows to the offices of three government ministers last month. Spain and Greece have also experienced similar turmoils.

Next to these protests specifically aimed at contesting the economic impact of EU greener measures, there are also those that oppose the massive imports of agricultural products from Ukraine flooding the Pol-

ish and the Romanian markets, also jeopardizing the profitability of local production. Romanian farmers, along with truck drivers, are blocking the borders with Ukraine, in revolt against the excessively cheap Ukrainian wheat. This is also the effect of EU’s decision in June 2022, to liberalize trade with Ukraine in the effort to mitigate the impact on Kyiv’s agricultural sector caused by the prolonged war. These farmers’ uprisings do not stem from anti-European or anti-ecologist sentiments. Instead, they arise in response to the exclusionary impacts of agricultural policies that, despite being moved by the best intentions, likely lack a genuine forward-looking approach demanded by sustainable development. The pressing and unpostponable need for ecological transition is proving that it cannot be met with short-term subsidy cuts, which are inevitably destined to short-term diminish yields and significantly affect production profitability. Likewise, the undisputable support to a nearby population and economy, like Ukraine’s, devastated by a violent aggression needs a more far-looking approach than decisions leading to an influx of low-cost goods into the internal market of the EU, which would inevitably have impacted the profitability of local productions.

Obviously, the reasons for these protests as well as for price rise are more intricate than this oversimplification implies. Likewise, the social world where these dynamics occur is much more complex than this cognitive shortcut might suggest.

While each protest is fueled by diverse motivations deeply intertwined with national policies, they are united by one element: The divergence between, on the one hand, the imperative need for expeditiously advancing the ecological transition to a sustainable production and consumption paradigm, necessitating a comprehensive and nonnegotiable approach to change, which includes necessary restrictions. On the other hand, a dire crisis that encompasses the economic, energy, health, geopolitical, and social dimensions, demanding immediate actions to mitigate the inevitable costs of change, often conflicting with the imperatives of the ecological transition. This divergence is poised to manifest as an even more worrying overarching polarization lending itself to easy political exploitation and crystallizing into ideological positions.

It is the case of the increasingly pronounced supremacist rhetoric of the divergence between national interests and supranational policies (in this case attributed to the EU), upon which right-wing sovereigntists and populists are stoking the flames to gain electoral advantages, inflating

anti-European sentiments, rising nationalism with the aim of accelerating opposition against the EU establishment.

The rise of the rural populist party “Farmer-Citizen Movement” in the Netherlands and the flag “Committee of Betrayed Farmers,” under which Italian farmers united, staging protests against a rather indistinct range of issues, including taxes, diesel, land selloffs, insect flours, and cultivated meat, serve as examples. The “tricky” rhetoric appropriating these revolts and imbuing them with Eurosceptic sentiment is that of *the poor farmers being damaged and ignored by the rich, supranational elites (read “EU”) with ideological (read: “hypocritical”) vision of protecting the planet (read “obscure interests of global powers”), rather than the people who, through hard work, bring fresh food to our tables.*

The turn these revolts are taking goes beyond Euroscepticism; it tells a broader global story: a paradoxical dual forking between security and ecological transition. This is paradoxical because the challenges of a forward-looking approach demanded by sustainable development end up in a backward-looking response leveraging securitarian claims.

How does all of this relate to consumer choices? Despite the lengthy introduction, which unmistakably reflects the author’s perspective, the intention of this book is not to embark on a critical discussion about the global crisis and the diverse economic, political, and geopolitical factors contributing to the fragmentation of the world’s global order as known until now. However, transitioning toward a responsible production/consumption paradigm, as suggested by ecological thinking, involves adopting a comprehensive, “feedbacking” epistemological standpoint (Marten, 2001). This recognizes that actions in the realm of production have inevitable consequences on consumption, and vice versa, like a feedback loop.

It is estimated that food production is responsible for a quarter of global greenhouse gas emissions and that 21% of emissions come from the cultivation of crops intended for direct human consumption and 18% of emissions come from the supply chains where farm produce is processed into final products for consumption. This means that human food consumption accounts for between 20% and 40% of the total environmental impact (Ritchie, 2019). Urgent measures are required to address this situation. However, from a comprehensive perspective, one cannot ignore that the summing up of decisions to reduce reliance on pesticides and fertilizers, cut subsidies for agricultural diesel, and favor low-cost imports of staple foods, while each individually pointing to a desirable sustainable

and inclusive development paradigm, would increase production costs in the short term, reduce the competitiveness of local products, and lead to higher food prices, challenging both producer and consumer agency. These first considerations about the connection to consumer choices allow an understanding that decisions made at various levels, from agricultural practices to economic policies, can ultimately influence the choices and affordability of consumers in the food market.

In this perspective, the question about what all of this has to do with a book investigating the reasons for food purchases takes probably relevance.

Straddling the line between serving as a manual for a sociological study of the diverse sociocultural dynamics sustaining food consumption and a broader reflection on the intricate and often contradictory sets of values and beliefs associated with eating during transition times, this book cannot overlook the complex scenario in which this reflection begins and develops. In the aftermath of the Weberian lesson, to understand why people act the way they do, means grasping the historical forces that, if not shaping their actions directly, have at least influenced the historical contexts in which they operated. In this book, sociological argumentation delves into the understanding of why we choose the foods we eat in the peculiar context of troubled and uncertain times – a question that unveils numerous others, including “why do we not consume the food we should?” or “why do we consume the food we shouldn’t?” and so forth.

This purpose aligns with Weber’s advocacy of a sociological standpoint, which connects cultural events to their concrete, historical causes through the study of precise data selected from particular perspectives. In own words, pronounced a century ago but never more relevant than today:

Our aim is the understanding of the characteristic uniqueness of the reality in which we move. We wish to understand on the one hand the relationships and the cultural significance of individual events in their contemporary manifestations and on the other the causes of their being historically so and not otherwise (Weber, 2011 [1922], p. 72).

Long before farmer revolts swept across Europe, a global emergency unfolded in January 2020 with the outbreak of the pandemic, ushering in a state of initially acute and then normalized uncertainty known as the “new normal.” This enduring period has brought forth prolonged chal-

lenges, including those posed by a partially subdued yet mysterious virus. It was accompanied by supply-chain disruptions and followed by a raw materials crisis worsened by subsequent wars. As a direct consequence of these wars, an energy shock spawned across Europe, which was largely dependent on energy sources held by countries in conflict. Economic volatility, unpredictable fluctuations, rising inflation, social tensions (including farmer protests), and escalating political turmoil stemming from these situations further contribute to featuring this crisis as a particularly multifaceted one. This sustained period of instability earned the appellation “permacrisis,” a designation that would be entitled as the word of the year for 2022 by Collins Dictionary.¹

The “perfect storm” of climate change, health emergencies, humanitarian catastrophes, energy shocks, and economic crises has given rise to various forms of upheaval, compromising the ecological transition and exacerbating its perceived divergence from security. At the same time, this utter tempest revealed the paramount importance of food, particularly food security, in the midst of a crisis.

In the context of this study, we will particularly analyze food and the challenges affecting it in current critical times from the perspective of consumption. Critics of this book will express their disappointment with the title itself, arguing that food-related consumption extends far beyond the act of purchase, and they are correct. Conversely, enthusiasts will appreciate that we start with the purchase because, especially in times of profound and prolonged crisis, this act encapsulates fundamental social dynamics. These dynamics encompass not only economic reasons or seemingly rational decisions but also symbolic, cultural, and social dimensions that involve consumers and their deepest beliefs in the broadest sense. As Bourdieu himself highlights in his seminal work framing the symbolic, distinctive meaning of consumer practices, most of the sociological significance of consumption as a lifestyle and expressions of taste and habitus revolves around and becomes manifest in the decisions surrounding the very act of purchase:

Having a million does not in itself make one able to live like a millionaire; and parvenus generally take a long time to learn that what they see as cul-

¹ See: <https://blog.collinsdictionary.com/language-lovers/a-year-of-permacrisis/> (accessed 30/04/2024).

pable prodigality is, in their new condition, expenditure of basic necessity. (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 374)

As implied by its title, this book sets out to engage in an explanatory inquiry about the “why,” which remains a paramount concern for sociologists – still torn between “comprehending” and “explaining” (Fornari, 2002; Coenen-Huter, 2019). Nevertheless, this explanatory effort holds great importance also for marketers, advertisers, and various scholars and professionals navigating the intricate landscape of consumption, especially in disruptive times like the present.

By exploring the “why behind,” this analysis invites readers to embark on a nuanced understanding of the intricate tapestry of concrete historical facts, considered as “clearly social,” “socially relevant,” and “socially conditioned” factors (to paraphrase the well-known Weberian tripartition) that shape our relationship with food as consumers in an ever-changing world. While our relationship with food has often been overlooked by the social sciences, particularly sociology, due to its seemingly trivial connection with bodily impulses and the “unreflective,” taken-for-granted nature of our daily activities (Mennell et al., 1992, p. 1), it extends beyond mere “eating” and holds profound sociological significance. This significance emanates just from this deeply ingrained presence in our routines, addressing both basic nutritional needs and the more complex sphere of taste and preferences, which entail desires and lifestyles. Food-related routines become particularly crucial to comprehend, especially when disrupted, causing them to lose their unreflective feature. This is evident in the unprecedented centrality gained by food during crises, as illustrated above.

In recent years, food consumption, particularly of items with distinctive attributes (e.g., local, organic, and certified), has become a primary focus in consumer demands, marketers’ discourses, and public narratives. This transformation serves as a mirror, reflecting more profound shifts in the social dynamics of our contemporary times, where food selecting has become a primary proof of consumer skills and discernment.

During periods of profound social change, when the predictive capabilities of expert systems weaken or falter, and perspectives become limited, the ability to seize glimpses of latent trends is not just an opportunity to undergo change but an extraordinary chance to actively influence and shape it. For instance, it becomes crucial not only to comprehend what

consumers want and why but also to monitor their actions and formulate hypotheses about potential actions. This is essential in facilitating the alignment of supply with demand, representing a socially relevant strategy to counteract waste and losses. But also to let producers and brands to maintain a hold on post-traumatic stressed consumers.

The disruptions mentioned above have significantly reshaped consumer behaviors, leaving individuals overwhelmed by frequently conflicting and diverging tendencies. These changes prompt brands to incorporate them into their branding or rebranding strategies (Mintel, 2024a).

Examples of these conflicting sentiments include a renewed sense of “being human” emerging from widespread suffering caused by the pandemic and subsequent images of wars, clashing with a pervasive mistrust toward an unknown “other,” evidenced by the rise of nationalist sentiments and sovereignty movements. The increasing nonmaterialistic desire for self-fulfillment, emphasizing values beyond monetary considerations, contrasts with a revengeful impulse toward consumption after an extended period of exclusion from it. The revival of communal relationships after social separation emerges alongside the simultaneous pervasive penetration of digital technologies and agile lifestyles developed during months of seclusion. A growingly polarized demand for engagement and stance-taking exists alongside a rising desire for relief from anxiety and an escape from mundane stressors. Similarly, an internalized new green awareness coexists with impoverishment and the loss of purchasing power, causing a delay or hindrance in adopting a greener lifestyle, aligning with the polarization highlighted in farmers’ protests. An overarching sense of positive perspectives accompanies the mounting mental distress of post-traumatic consumers. The search for authenticity and security goes hand in hand with the pervasive influence of new artificial intelligence on consumers’ daily lives and decisions in every aspect of their lives.

Such conflicting sentiments among consumers mirror, at the microlevel, the paradoxical divergence between security and sustainability emerging at the macro-level, as referred to at the beginning of this introduction, giving rise to contradictory axiology.

When navigating this intricate landscape, businesses must prioritize understanding and adapting to these evolving trends for resilience in these turbulent times. Additionally, with the aid of AI, they can propel

the human-machine ecosystem toward co-creation (Euromonitor, 2024), establishing a new connection between production and consumption.

Global market insights underscore that manufacturers in the fast-moving consumer goods and consumer packaged goods (FMCG/CPG) sector, producing items intended for everyday consumer use with a short shelf life, have encountered three primary challenges since the onset of the pandemic: Recognizing shifts in consumer patterns and understanding their impact on short- and long-term demand, analyzing channel performance as shopping habits evolve, and comprehending consumers’ motivations behind buying patterns (Nielsen, 2020). Even today, consumers around the world provide evidence that they want to connect with brands, and brands, in turn,

[...] must reestablish and strengthen their relationship with consumers, placing consistent delivery of functionality at the core of their message and ensuring that reliability, trust and authenticity feed into the integrity of their identity and vision. (Mintel, 2024a)

Accordingly, the objective of this book is to lead readers through an exploration of the intricate interplay among societal, cultural, and individual influences that shape attitudes and choices in the realm of food consumption, particularly in this era marked by profound uncertainty. In alignment with its ambitious mission, the book delves into how sweeping societal transformations, unfolding amid a landscape of multiple crises, challenge individual eating habits, and mold them into new social configurations. The endeavor to explore and understand some of these challenges will be complemented by an effort to provide a comprehensive overview of prominent social theories that have examined the evolution of consumption, particularly in relation to food and taste, during key stages of modern and late modern society.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of consumption as a key concept in the social sciences and traces its evolution within the framework of the principal theoretical approaches and methodological analytical families, based on the categorization proposed by Halkier (2017), that have addressed it in the context of the rise and evolution of consumer society. This section explores the notion of the consumer as an agent in the market, which is itself viewed as a social space. The discussion centers around the analytical notion of “agency,” referring to the subjective capacity to act – whether

through actions or expressions – especially in relation to social change. This capacity can manifest as an individual's ability to effect change or resist structural constraints and social inertia, particularly during transitional periods aimed at developing a full awareness of responsible consumer behaviors as part of exercising citizenship. The section also reflects on how this concept of consumer agency has expanded in recent decades to encompass contrasting perspectives, particularly in light of post-anthropocentric perspectives that reconsider what it means to be human in a world where there is an increasing awareness of human impact on oneself and the surrounding environment. On the one hand, the proposed analysis emphasizes the importance of not disregarding the human subject and its capacity for self-reflection, focusing on values and individual empowerment through awareness, especially in consumption practices during times of crisis and social change. On the other hand, it includes theoretical formulations developed within a practice-theoretical perspective, such as the theory of dilemmas affecting consumer tastes amid an omnivorous offering. This formulation highlights agency less as an exercise of wholly intentional initiative and more as the performativity embedded in socially shaped practices that also influence tastes. While some consideration is given to these perspectives that underscore the diminishing role of individual intentionality in favor of a broader dynamic that includes the nonhuman realm, where both subjects and objects (such as technologies) act and are acted upon simultaneously, the text firmly advocates, from a sociological perspective, for maintaining a focus on the values that guide individuals to understand their contradictions, especially during times of transition.

Chapter 2 specifically examines food consumption through the lens of its contemporary dilemmas gripping consumers, underscoring the crucial role of sociological analysis in comprehending taste and its contradictions as a fundamental component of consumer culture and society, and its updating in light of an idea of sustainability that is increasingly elusive and contradictory. This section questions the feasibility of continuing to use antinomic categories, as introduced by Warde about thirty years ago, in a post-anthropocentric era where a holistic and ecological vision should negate any dualism. However, the analysis demonstrates that, just as nudges and technoscience have not reduced or eliminated human agency but instead have amplified it, similarly, the complexity and transcendence of an anthropocentric view, where humans act in opposition to a reified nature, have not eradicated dualisms. On the contrary, con-

temporary complexity is forcefully bringing them back into prominence through rhetoric that strongly emphasizes polarized stances’ tracing the development of food antinomies to the present day and examining the dilemmas faced by contemporary food consumers amid the crisis and their contradictory stances. Moving from the four basic antinomies devised by Alan Warde over twenty years ago and proposing an updated evolution, this section particularly explores how conflicting values, increasingly oscillating between environmental concerns and identity aspirations in a society that is in a permanent, multilayered crisis, can lead to sometimes paradoxical consumption choices.

Chapter 3 explores another dimension rooted in consumer dynamics, which the beyond-human dynamic of structure and agency, surpassing traditional human-centric views, has not yet disregarded: the aspirational side of consumption. “We eat what we would like to be like” reviews and subverts, in sociological terms, the overused philosophical statement “we are what we eat.” It examines how consumers, in their practical choices, are guided not only by practical needs or interests but also by aspirations, desires, and the symbolic meanings attached to the products or experiences they consume. This desirability, far from being a “bias” in consumer choices, reflects the internalized value system distinguishing social groups and influences the “why” behind food purchases in terms of the stratification of tastes. In this section this dimension of consumption analysis encompasses the internalized material factors that shape consumer aspirations for social distinction through the exhibition of tastes, revealing their underlying social stratification. For example, this section focuses on how the ostentatious consumption once associated with wealthy consumers, as described by Veblen, has transformed into a middle-class pursuit of cultural refinement and skillful connoisseurship, often manifesting as competition with neighbors, as outlined by Bourdieu. A competition that remains vibrant despite the apparent disappearance of overt social conflicts continues to shape the contemporary foodscape. In this section, space is also devoted to the role of culture and symbolic meanings. Here, we find references to approaches emphasizing the cultural side of consumption, represented on the right-hand side of our chart depicting the analytical families of consumption (Figure 2).

Chapter 4 addresses consumption as a behavior, illustrated on the upper-left side of the analytical families. The approaches and examples provided in this chapter focus on the normative values internalized as

subjective motives in the form of attitudes and practical evaluative judgments that sustain decision-making, particularly in reference to sustainable consumer behaviors. By delving into the drivers of consumption, aided by theoretical frameworks that account for the role of values and sociocultural motives associated with eating habits, this part provides an examination of the complex and contradictory axiology that shape people's dietary choices amid changing social and cultural landscapes. The reader is called to confront with a critical analysis of the intricacies of contemporary consumer dynamics in a society that values both omnivorism with its compulsion to consume and sustainable eating with its de-consumeristic call for frugality and mindfulness.

Focused on both consumer practices and behaviors, these two sections offer a broad overview on different sociological understanding framing both conventional and emerging forms of consumption from different angles. The analysis presents various paradigms framing consumption within the social sciences, including those by Veblen, Bourdieu, Warde, Mennell, Maffesoli, Schwartz, Ajzen, and Durkheim, who, at the end of the book, provides us with insights into social dynamics still valuable for delving into the social forces at play in contemporary foodscapes. Actually, these paradigms represent the “chalk and cheese” (Shove, 2010, p. 1279) of perspectives on consumption within the social sciences. “Chalk” refers to theories focusing on causal factors and external drivers, treating habits as drivers of individual behavior or emphasizing the meaning-making and symbolic side of agency. By contrast, “cheese” encompasses theories that place routines and socially shaped practices as the central units of inquiry, emphasizing the endogenous and emergent dynamics inscribed within them and effacing the agent to carriers of performances. Indeed, all of them remain very powerful in addressing different aspects of consumer patterns, which, in difficult and changing times, are morphing into enigmatic and unpredictable forms. These paradigms help in finding suitable tools to decipher the mysteries behind the “why” of food-buying decisions.

Furthermore, especially the reference to the concept of neotribe applied to the community creation dynamics online, the book doesn't overlook the influence of digital platforms and the proliferation of discourses about food on the formation of taste and identity, and the extent to which digitalization contributes to creating duplicitous, contradictory value systems and false but often appealing food mythologies (e.g., the

myth of “authentic food”). By examining the complex predicaments of sustainable eating in the digital environment, the analysis sheds light on the prevalence of elusive forms of food consumption practiced by increasingly unpredictable and disloyal consumers. These consumers are, nonetheless, actively seeking emotional resonance and value alignment with brands and social groups. Simultaneously, this section investigates the narrowing of socially desirable consumption patterns, wherein a subset of core values and predetermined scripts become indispensable for facilitating the urgent shift toward a sustainable paradigm. In this context, the evolving axiology related to food reveals the ambivalence inherent in the broader and contradictory, but no longer deferrable, process of embracing a greener culinary ethos. These aspects are focused on in the concluding chapter of the book, where some dynamics crucial in sociological thinking, namely the relationship between personal integration and social regulation of Durkheimian memory, are used to delve into the concept of authenticity – a paramount mantra for the contemporary food consumer. The quest for authenticity, crowding online and offline consumer claims, reflects the rise of communal feelings and new forms of imagined or practiced social attachment. These range from the (gastro)nationalistic drift behind the glorification of genuine local food to the online organization of networks for direct food purchases between farmers and consumers, representing a powerful paradigm shift toward sustainable consumption.

This exploration leaves the reader with an urgent and thought-provoking question going through the whole book since its cover: Is it possible, in an era marked by emerging “shocks” evolving into a permanent crisis, to catch some deeper explanatory patterns that may help understand and possibly reconcile the immediate concerns of the crisis agenda with the central and unpostponable imperatives of creating a more sustainable food system? No solution is of course provided, nor is it the intention. However, by employing the analytical lenses of sociological argumentation (and imagination), encouraging reflection to find explanatory connections, and raising awareness about some of the “whys” of current consumer trends, this exploration aims to pave the way for the initial question of *whether* a more sustainable future for foodscapes in an era marked by significant changes can be addressed, transforming it into the question of *how* it can be achieved. The decision of *when* and *wherefrom* to embark on this formidable journey lies with the reader.