

Feed our farmers or our population? Looking beyond the unsolvable dilemma



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An opinion piece



photo by Rafal Swidzinski from Freemages

What happens in our heads, when we see food prices rise? We relate to all the other costs of living, like the rising housing and energy prices, and consider that our quality of life will suffer a blow. More money to food means less money to culture, entertainment, recreational activities, renewing shoes, and clothes, traveling, etc. Not only our quality of life might suffer, actually, but also our savings for future projects and investments, to cover our children's education, our possible healthcare costs, the perspective of having to buy a new car unexpectedly, the perspective of only receiving a

lowered retiring allowance. In the worst cases, rising food costs also mean families having issues feeding their children at the end of the month. As a matter of fact, the situation is also true for the farmer, when he/she sees her/his payment drop.

We were told that we are greedy animals, that it's in our nature to want more. Is it, really? Capitalism, in its present form, deprived us of two things: security, and stability. In this context, what does our dissatisfaction with rising food prices express? We basically relate to what we would immediately lose as purchasing power, for things — the consumption society tells us — are more important than food. In this consumption-based mindset, we also relate to the fact that less purchasing power can turn to be dangerous: impoverishment can ultimately lead to not being able to afford some essentials that have been converted into commodities: housing, energy, private pensions, healthcare, education. When cheap food is offered to us, our prime reflex is to consider how much it will lead us to spare for other essential or less essential things. In a society where nothing anymore comes for granted and even the essentials are things we have to fight for not being deprived of, who would want to renounce cheap food?

For decades, we have been able to produce cheap food. Cheap food comes at a price though: a price sometimes paid by us, but mostly by others. Why do you think, the vegetables cultivated in the greenhouses of Southern Europe are cheap? Because many rely on the work of barely paid and protected migrants¹. Why do you think you can get cheap pineapples from South America? Because workers spray pesticides forbidden in Europe without the least shred of protection for their own health. Why do you think, you can get cheap frozen shrimps in the supermarket? Because workers are stuck on ships in living conditions tantamount to modern slavery. Intensive animal husbandry, generating cheap meat, comes with many documented adverse effects on land, water use, and related breaches in human rights — and I am not even mentioning here the questionable ethical practices related to animal welfare in many intensive production systems. More globally, intensive monocultures inherited from the green revolution have imposed themselves with little regard for their effective impact on social justice, health, and biodiversity, nor guarantees of effective access to food for many. There are, admittedly, technological advances through automation, robotization, controlled closed environments, that allow, in horticulture, for example, the production of cheap food at a definite lower human and environmental price than before. However, **for the overall majority of our production, cheap prices mean power pressures on cheap**

labor and ruthless exploitation of natural resources. So does the over-production trend based on the same pattern of cheap clothes, for example.

Now, let's go back to our consumption reflexes a bit and to this anguish of having to spare resources — to spend them on other items of expenditure necessary to guarantee us a social status, or simply to guarantee the essentials of our human dignity. We know that the current consumption trend is not sustainable for the planet. It is also a never-ending circle of exploiting others. Pragmatically, we, Westerners closed a handy eye to the infringements on the dignity of workers and the environmental costs of many productions, including food. We are backed up in this by the decidedly practical — and remarkably featured to our needs — frames of the World Trade Organisation, considering that only a product's intrinsic value mattered in terms of trade, and not the way that product was made. This allows us at the same time to turn a blind eye to countless abuses of right in the making processes of the goods we import and to neglect our responsibility in the generation of the externalities of the products we consume.

We value cheap because it allows us more, and for the same amount of money, we can afford an abundance of goods that society wants us to believe will make us happy. The more we have, the more we can show we have, the more satisfied we are, as having deserved this all, no doubt. Did we really deserve this, or were we just lucky? Those who were born elsewhere on the planet know already too good what it is to be themselves converted into a product on the market with limited/no rights. Our social systems still hold in front of the neoliberal trend of deregulation, but for how long?

Let us imagine, for a minute, that the society guarantees you the essentials necessary to your dignity (decent housing, free healthcare, controlled energy prices, basic income guarantee, including when becoming older, free education). Some may say, I am a dangerous left-wing utopian. The whole movement of privatization mobilized the tales of efficiency and human responsibility against waste in making all of these — though essential objects —conditioned to merit. This trend already showed enough flaws though, and in particular that of generating the very assumed human behavior it attempted to fight, once people reach a certain level of income that allows them access to those resources, and leaving others deprived. In this context, **defending cheap food, to not scare the population, is actually sticking a plaster on a whole dysfunctional system, where we go on exploiting others to be able to maintain ourselves in a system where we similarly struggle to survive.** We tend to forget that, by giving in to the illusory power that consumption gives us.

If tomorrow, you didn't have to worry about your future, if tomorrow, you lived in decent housing and environmental conditions, with cultural resources to make you grow as an individual and opportunities to exchange with others, would you mind spending more money on food? Would you mind not being able to save money for affording a tempting but non-essential gadget? Same, if your clothes were made to last rather than turning into rags after two laundry times, if you could select them because you want to hold them for more than a season, would you mind paying more money for them? Spending more money on quality-clothes and quality food products would allow us to revalorize objects made to last, and food products where yield does not come at the expense of taste, texture — in a nutshell, what is part of the simple but valuable pleasures of life. Would we still overconsume and waste food that is tasteful and hearty? Today, food is a commodity that lacks value, because it basically has no other virtue than to fill us with calories, that we can buy in volumes and waste without remorse.

Spending more money on quality clothes and food products would allow the revival of supply chains with ethical criteria regarding the share of the added value, the treatment of workers, the impact on nature and the environment. From a trend of wasteful overproduction and overconsumption, we would re-anchor supply chains into a lifecycle distinct from a headlong rush towards the generation of profits at the costs of many, to the benefits of few. Would we be less happy because of that? I don't think so, if we compensate the artificial pleasure of grabbing, consuming, and wasting, with the deep pleasures of slowly tasting, appreciating and cherishing goods meant to fill our senses and our memories.

So, what prevents us to go in that direction? Consumption capitalism runs on one fear: the fear of being deprived. Cheap consumption brings to deprived people the illusion that they still can hold standards of dignity, but only relies on the deprivation of others — close or far away — from their own dignity and ability to survive. **Do we want to perpetuate that cycle?**

There is another future possible. However, people won't be able to participate in that other future if society doesn't give them back the security and the dignity to make other choices than just survival. Survival doesn't bring virtues, survival is not an incentive to make one's way up, **survival is a systemic strategy to make people dependent upon an exploitive pattern and make them co-perpetrators of that never-ending cycle** of generating richness at the cost of people and nature.

Humanity generates an insane amount of growth and richness. Saying we couldn't afford another system than the present one, concentrating these riches in the hands of few, is an insult to our intelligence and to the imagination. **If you are focusing on maintaining cheap food to secure your population at the costs of other populations and the environment, you are perpetuating this fundamental imbalance generated by wealth inequality.** The key to someone's dignity cannot be someone else's lack of dignity, it's even surprising to have to remind these essentials. This dilemma is systemic, hence **the answer must also be systemic**: redistributing wealth and developing services that guarantee everyone's essential needs will keep people out of insecurity and precariousness. Paying food the price needed to guarantee the producers' dignity, thinking collectively about the design of the supply chains in a way to guarantee the long-term sustainability of productions, who will then see that as an issue?

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¹ I also recommend reading of the book by Jean-Baptiste Malet, *L'empire de l'or rouge*, also object of a documentary. In this book, the author brilliantly and systematically decrypts, through the case study of the production of tomatoes, the mechanisms allowing the production of cheap food, and the impacts on the precarization of workers.

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To go further on the topic and explore the historical dimension of the question of access to food and support to agriculture in the Belgian context, I recommend reading the PhD dissertation of Laura Eskens (Eskens, L., Van Molle, H. (sup.), Segers, Y. (cosup.) (2019). *De retoriek van honger en overvloed. Het Belgische agro-voedselbeleid, ca. 1930–1955*, KU Leuven, 2019), as well as her peer-reviewed paper (Eskens L. (2018). 'The Troublesome Word of Crisis': Discourse on the Agricultural Crisis of the 1930s in the Belgian Parliament. *Rural History*, 29(2), 237–257. doi:10.1017/S0956793318000122)

On the dynamics of food aid and the right to food in an agri-food system based on overproduction patterns, see the excellent recent article in Bastamag:

<https://www.bastamag.net/Les-derives-de-l-aide-alimentaire-defiscalisation-hypermarches-surproduction-agro-industrie-grande-distribution>

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