Acta Univ. Sapientiae, Social Analysis, **6**, 2 (2016) 85–92

# *Socio.hu*, The Social Meaning of Food. Special Issue in English, No 3 (2015)

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In the last two decades, we have been able to witness a new momentum of nutrition research in the social sciences. This is thanks to new phenomena that have been published on this subject in areas such as gastro-tourism, gastronomic festivals, and the significance of certain aspects of nutrition in development endeavours as well as the introduction of the ecological theme into nutrition. Questions related to starvation and social justice have also been raised again in this context. But perhaps the most striking is the emergence of a wide variety of AFNs, which have both become extremely popular research objects in themselves and in association with economic, social, ethical, legal, and other issues. The literature on alternative agriculture, local food, and AFNs has grown enormously in recent years not only in activist narratives but also in academic debates (see Cucco & Fonte 2015: 23), but until recently Central and Eastern Europe has been almost absent in the analysis of them.

The volume of studies titled *Ethical Eating in the Postsocialist and Socialist World* (Klein, Jung, and Caldwell 2014), which shows the movements and the related processes of a more restricted region, is an exception. On the one hand, this volume fits comfortably into western studies on the subject, while, on the other, it shows the differences caused by the time "backlog" of different social processes. Its virtue is that it reveals that although a global phenomenon and movements are involved, certain individual movements are still deeply rooted in the national/regional/local historical and political context. The authors indicate this with the results of research in the post-socialist countries.

I consider the special issue of *Socio.hu* (2015) under the title *The Social Meaning of Food*[1] especially important; its subject is nutrition, and within this a special emphasis is on the examination of alternative food networks (almost all of the studies connected to it in one way or another).

This issue includes theoretical works as well as case studies. It is characterized by methodological diversity: the authors worked with interviews, participant

1 http://www.socio.hu/en/special-issue-2015-food

observation (Bilewicz & Śpiewak), surveys (Nistor), and analysis of historical sources and cookbooks (Duvnjak, Macan, Martin, and Sampeck).

Food and nutrition is presented in a broad perspective, but studies clearly outline two main concerns about nutrition: the amount of food (its existence at all; see Asztalos Morell, Šikić-Mićanović) and quality (see Bilewicz & Śpiewak, Cucco & Fonte, Csurgó & Megyesi, Nistor). The appearance of these two questions in nutrition literature is not new for the right quantity and quality of food is essential in any society. Alan Beardsworth and Teresa Keil, when showing the historical context of the concerns about nutrition, consider the lack of food and hunger and contaminated food throughout history as main sources of troubles. According to them, modern societies are also experiencing various risk elements in nutrition, but while in the past religion, tradition, and culture determined what was safe and what was not, in modern societies everyone must make a decision in the field of nutrition, with a kind of *nutritional normlessness* – as the authors put it. The disappearance of forms of risk identification and management providing traditional models that are valid for everyone is putting a much greater decision-making burden on the individual, which in itself generates anxiety (Beardsworth & Keil 1997: 150–160).

Hunger and the risk of contaminated food, of course, continue to exist to this day, even in western countries, but other risk elements or dilemmas have joined these two components. Such things are addressed in the new findings appearing in nutrition research, which pose a challenge to traditional eating habits (for example, traditional dishes proven to be unhealthy). On the other hand, ethical issues arising with regard to food, such as animal rights, sustainability, working conditions and the livelihoods of farmers, use of bio- and nano-technology, research ethics, and so forth are also posing real dilemmas (Coff, Korthals, and Barling 2008: 9).

Many of these questions initially belonged within the 'scope' of alternative social and lifestyle movements. This in turn gave rise to ethical, alternative, and organic alternative food networks (ALFs). Among the nutrition concerns of the second half of the twentieth century and the twenty-first century, quality and quantity concerns are specially emphasized, including the chemical content of raw materials, preservation and storage chemicals, genetically modified raw materials, and so on. While the concern had remained partly a concern for human health, the same risk elements led many people to the exploration and understanding of the relationship between food and environmental problems, and thus to the incorporation of another risk element in the discourse. These movements formulate themselves against the food industry dictated by global capitalism and they connect the concern for health with the value systems and struggles for security, autonomy, and equal accessibility (see Klein, Jung, and Caldwell 2014: 2).

Clarification of the concepts in contemporary ALFs is also an important theme of social science texts dealing with them including the studies that can be found here as well. From the concepts to be clarified, the term *local food* especially stands out since it seems that the locality of food is gaining increasing importance alongside (and often as opposed to) the organic aspect. Gianluca Brunori in his article (Brunori 2007) proposes that we consider the 'local turn' in the light of the 'quality turn'. (See the post-organic local food concept in Cucco and Fonte's article.) The term *local food* has many interpretations – looking at 'local' from a narrower or a broader aspect –, in addition to which "the 'local' refers not only to the dimension of distance, but also to the time, tradition and history that form the concept of territory" (Bilewicz & Śpiewak 147). That is why the majority of authors agree that "the local food is a social construct, as its meaning is socially negotiated" (Bilewicz & Śpiewak 147).

As I have already indicated above, this issue of *Socio.hu* includes a mixture of theoretical works and case studies. It begins with two review articles: Karl Bruckmeier's text of the philosophical aspect of food and the study of Ivan Cucco and Maria Fonte, *Local Food and Civic Food Networks as a Real Utopias Project*.

Bruckmeier convincingly shows the relevance of philosophy on the subject, and his brief discussion of food history shows potential themes of a philosophy of food in the sense of an interdisciplinary science. The aim of his paper is to understand the global changes of food systems and the transcultural consequences of these changes and also to renew the philosophy of food to analyse and reflect the wider social, cultural, and ecological problems of food production and consumption. We can agree with the author that such critical analyses require, beyond empirical research and its assessment, knowledge syntheses, theoretical reflection, and normative judgements. Moreover, contemporary food cultures being in close connection with environmental discourses (traditional food, local food, slow food, vegetarian food, organic food, etc.) are discussed in ethical or moral terms. To understand the significance of such alternatives for solving nutrition problems requires comparison, theoretical reflection, and knowledge synthesis. He emphasizes that the philosophy of food has practical significance: it develops in an open discourse, in multi-dimensional analyses of food processes with cultural, social, political, economic, and ecological knowledge components, and it can search for and suggest solutions to food and resource problems.[2]

The second review article is the work of Ivan Cucco and Maria Fonte, who deal with political and transformative dimensions of different local food projects. They

2 Similarly to environment philosophy. Environmental philosophers believe that modern European thought and practice – in addition to science – is determined by philosophy, and among other things today's environmentally destructive practices are due to that (see, for example, the Cartesian mechanical philosophy). Therefore, the task of philosophy is to reverse this process by creating a new philosophy which radically rethinks the relationship between man and nature. For its summary in Hungarian, see Tóth I., János 2013, Preface: 7–19.

look at local food as a diagnosis and critique of the present and the mainstream food system, and they propose that one should "read local food as a 'real utopia' project whose aim is the transformation of the food economy in the direction of sustainability, social emancipation and social justice" (Cucco & Fonte 2015: 22). They think that local food and civic food networks provide a prefiguration of the desirable future food economy and proposals of strategies for getting there. In this frame of reference, local food, the *place-embeddedness* of food, may thus be conceived of as local society's resistance strategy against globalization and neoliberalism. They consider local food movements to be capable of establishing new economic and social relations at the margins of the neoliberal food economy or partner with local institutions to consolidate new experiences with food democracy and food justice (22). They believe that the fragmented pursuits, the AFNs should cooperate more, which can eventually lead to (or force) a reflexive, more democratic, socially empowering system of governance.

The list of research articles starts with Carla D. Martin and Kathryn E. Sampeck's study on chocolate. This paper examines the changing role of chocolate in European society, focusing on the food movement's turn to slow, small-batch, craft chocolate, as a way to critically analysing relationships of labour and race, gender, and class inequality. The authors provide a brief description of the history of chocolate, its origin and spread around the world, and the parallel changes in both its consumption and interpretation. They present different aspects of chocolate and their changes: as a flavour, as a luxury, as a social rank indicator, and they also outline the social aspects of growing cocoa, such as the issue of slavery or the process of genderization, and how chocolate consumption became a woman-thing. They interpret contemporary industrial chocolate and the fine and craft chocolate industry along the above lines, pointing out contemporary forms of social inequalities like junk food chocolate or child labour in the chocolate industry. They think one of the goals of the study is that: "examining food access and food justice in the light of ways people produce and consume chocolate can challenge assumptions about social inequalities, race, health, and identity and offer insights into long-term sustainability" (Martin & Sampeck 2015: 37).

The next paper studies the traditional cuisine of the Dalmatian Islands as a kind of potential for the development of gastro-tourism. The authors Neven Duvnjak and Đeni Macan have explored the islands' nutrition and the traditional elements that are still available and that function or can function as gastronomic specialities for tourists with the help of informal conversations and content analysis of Dalmatian cook books. Their result shows that the cuisine of the rural villages is strongly linked to tradition. The modern approach appears sporadically and the postmodern approach does not appear at all. The authors see this food culture, the products from family production, the simple methods of food preparation and consumption as excellent opportunities as they are sustainable, can be linked to

the postmodern ecological world and because they are uniquely local can also be incorporated into the idea of diversity and the restoration of local knowledge.

Ildikó Asztalos Morell's case study sets the focus on innovative ways to combat food poverty in rural Hungary. Its starting point is that food poverty is associated with malnutrition, which can refer both to the lack of food and its dissatisfying quality, and that "food poverty in the post-socialist rural context does not emerge as a consequence of natural catastrophes or lacking accessibility to food. Rather, it is the outcome of the unequal distribution of incomes and resources" (83). Asztalos Morell traces food poverty, marginalities, and the disembedment of rural communities following the post-socialist transition to capitalism, she displays the causes of marginalization (de-industrialization, a neoliberal welfare state, and enhanced ethnic/social marginalization), and examines the forms of struggles against food poverty. In this paper, she focuses on municipalities that have developed collaborations with a civil-society-initiated project: PROLECSO (initiated in Hejőkeresztúr), an example of community-development-based social agriculture. The dilemma "between giving a fish or the net" (also) prevails in connection with the struggles against food-poverty. Governmental and donor agencies are often criticized for focusing on needs assessments, reproducing the image of marginalized groups as needy, and reinforcing their status as clients. Instead of this, the author advocates empowerment, agency and asset-based community development becoming more and more dominant in civil projects, and she assesses the initiations in question from their theoretical frame and practice. Bearing all this in mind, her paper – through the example of PROLECSO – explores the differences and potential synergies between municipality and civil-organization-based social agriculture projects aiming to combat marginalization welfare dependency.

The next case study (*Feeding Roma Families: From Hunger to Inequalitie*s) deals with the Roma communities in Croatia, a social group in a similarly difficult situation. During her ethnographic fieldwork carried out in five Roma settlements, Lynette Šikić-Mićanović explored how Roma households experience severe material deprivation, feed their families, and describes their everyday experiences of food insecurity and hunger. The author places this present situation in a historical context (as Asztalos Morell did): she points out how the marginalization of Roma groups has been sped up by the disappearance of the benefits of socialism, the transition to capitalism, and the Yugoslav war. She also points out the way in which the Roma have become (not only in Croatia but all over Europe) over-represented in all categories in need of social protection. This paper explores the consumption levels at home and at school and the quality of this food, as well as the difficulties of feeding large families and the gendered aspects of the topic. An especially valuable feature of the study is that the fieldwork material collected by the author is also a source of data showing how gender and other social categories, such as ethnicity, age, and class, intersect.

Laura Nistor's paper also examines the meaning of local food and the discourses about it in Romanian urban contexts. The author collected deeper narratives with the help of focus-group interviews in order to know what local food meant to the people interviewed, how they perceived the different features of local foods (e.g. tradition, organic, taste, ingredients, etc.), and what their motivations and limitations were in connection with local food consumption. As I have mentioned above, the dominant question of present-day nutrition research is the meaning of local food and associated ideas and practices. Laura Nistor's research contributes greatly to the refinement of the meaning of local food and its interpretation. She goes through the main motivations of alternative food consumption practices and its individual forms in general (values centred around health and safety) as well as broader moral issues, e.g. the ethical treatment of animals, the morality of genetically modified foods, hunger and other forms of exclusion, the role of food in constructing gender and personal identity, etc. Then, she locates the consumption of local food among alternative food consumption movements and motivations. Her study shows that urban consumers primarily look for the intrinsic characteristics of food such as taste and ingredients. On the other hand, local food consumption seems to be much more motivated by health concerns and status assignment than by ethical and ecological matters. She found two definitions of local food during the examination of the discourses: 1) place-centred, geographical and 2) production-centred, 'how it is made'.

Aleksandra Bilewicz and Ruta Śpiewak's study undertakes the task of examining one form of Alternative Food Network (AFN), the Polish consumer cooperatives. The authors start by reviewing the AFN types, their diversity and history, and motivations and key concepts of their development, and then they put the consumer cooperatives, relatively new in Poland, into this context. The authors describe the specific character of this type of AFN, both from the consumers' and producers' point of view, and reflect on the issue of how specific social and historical background influence their development. They introduce the Polish context (agricultural model, the economic factor, food self-provisioning, postmodern patterns of food purchase) and submit a short history of cooperatives (from 2010 to 2015). They found that there were two types in Poland: activist and consumer-oriented. Finally, they show the cooperative's enclave feature, namely that the groups are a kind of elitist enclaves based on distinction from people buying in "conventional stores". The authors look at them as a kind of *lifestyle enclave* that has a specific lifestyle and the relevant cultural and social capital. At the same time, this enclave-character has many disadvantages: it creates "exclusive niches" both on the side of the consumers and among the farming community. In their studies, Aleksandra Bilewicz and Ruta Śpiewak present the historical roots and the present-day consequences of all this (lack of trust, general weaknesses of the civic activity in Poland, etc.) very convincingly. I believe that

the Polish example shows many similarities with the situation in Hungary, and that this is no accident.

With Bernadett Csurgó and Boldizsár Megyesi's case study, we return to Hungary. The authors study another aspect of local food: the potential identity-forming impact and the role in self-promotion of rural communities. It is well known from the rural development literature (see, inter alia, Csurgó & Szatmári 2014) that the European rural development system looks at exploration and use of the local economic, social, and cultural resources as the main tool to eliminate regional inequalities. Due to this development, strategies based on the use and value creating of local resources are becoming more emphasized in Hungarian rural development. The endogenous rural development replacing the exogenous development policy (based on modernization, external resources) in the 1990s relied on local natural and human resources. In this development, local identity is just as important; it is "a key in external representation and promotion of the given rural area and the development of the local community as well" (Csurgó & Szatmári 2014: 34). The authors have been carrying out qualitative and anthropological research on agricultural restructuring in Hungary for two decades. In this study, they analyse the role of short food supply chains (SFSC) and local food in three Hungarian micro-regions (Zalaszentgrót, Derecske–Létavértes, and Őrség), and they try to answer the question "how a local community presents itself through local food production, and how local communities can be built by revitalizing a part of the local cultural heritage: a local food product" (Csurgó & Megyesi 2015: 167). Their results suggest that "local food products and relating local events can hardly be a base of the local image outside the region, but it can help to build and strengthen the local community and local identity" (Csurgó & Megyesi 2015: 167).

Johan Pottier, a prominent researcher in nutritional anthropology, says in relation to literature dealing with food security that many current studies draw attention to the dynamic relations between globalizing and localizing processes and to the need to understand them. He points out that changing global (economic, political, cultural, environmental) conditions constantly re-localize in the national, regional, or local knowledge and organizational framework (Pottier 1999: 6–7).

As we have seen, the thematic edition of *socio.hu* explores the contemporary food culture of our region from many aspects. The choice of topic of the edition and the studies it contains show that concerns regarding the social issues of nutrition and nutrition-related movements generate increasing interests among Central and Eastern European social scientists, who can both see perfectly the features resulting from the region's specific historical and social situation and make them visible as well. In this, they can contribute to sporadic existing research results as well as confirm the above mentioned thesis, which says global issues and questions are constantly re-localizing in the local context.

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