Food utopias in Switzerland

Practices and narratives of transitions towards more sustainable food systems

Wednesday 7th of June 2017, 09.00 – 17.30
Anthropology Institute, University of Neuchâtel
Conference program

June 7th 2017, 09:00 – 17:30
Anthropology Institute, University of Neuchâtel, Rue Saint-Nicolas 4, Neuchâtel

9:00  Welcoming words and introduction

9:15  **Keynote: In Search of Good Farmers: Food Utopias, Care, and the Future of Food**  
      Paul Stock (The University of Kansas)

10:15  **Coffee break**

10:30  **Panel 1: Bringing agriculture in cities**  
      > Imagining and practising the edible city in the canton of Geneva: The class politics of urban food production  
      Marion Ernwein (Fellow of the Swiss National Science Foundation, University of Oxford)

      > Organizing Urban Agriculture: The Basel Example of Practice.  
      Isidore Walliman (Maxwell School, Syracuse University)

      Discussant: Joëlle Salomon-Cavin (University of Lausanne)

12:00  **Lunch**

13:30  **Panel 2: Redefining the relationship between consumers and producers**  
      > New forms of solidarity economy? Re-visiting producer-consumer relations in 20th century Switzerland.  
      Bettina Scharrer, Centre for Development and Environment CDE, University of Bern;  
      Peter Moser, Archives of Rural History (ARH), Bern

      > Contract, constraints and food as vectors of change in alternative food networks  
      Marion Fresia, Jérémie Forney and Julien Vuilleumier (University of Neuchâtel)

      Discussant : Hugh Campbell (University of Otago)

15:00  **Coffee**

15:30  **Panel 3: Giving a new meaning to the act of producing and consuming**  
      > La permaculture : au-delà de l’agriculture  
      Gaëtan Morard (Université de Neuchâtel)

      > Citizen-consumers’ and food decision-making processes in Switzerland: often called upon, rarely influential?  
      Rémi Schweizer (University of Lausanne)

      > Towards healthy and sustainable food consumption practices: the role of prescriptions.  
      Laurence Godin and Marlyne Sahakian (FGSE, University of Lausanne)

      Discussant : Philip Balsiger (University of Neuchâtel)
Food utopias in Switzerland

Practices and narratives of transitions towards more sustainable food systems

Until recently, agrifood systems were invested with a great hope of eradicating hunger and providing cheap access for all to a wide variety of food. Today they are the target of growing popular and media critics because of their dramatic consequences on health, ecosystems and social justice. At the same time, food continues to produce new stories of hope: in many contemporary utopias, it is constructed as the starting point of a possible transition towards a post-productivist world, which would be more sustainable, responsible and just. Urban agriculture, permaculture, community-supported agriculture, Slow Food movements or critical consumption, everywhere in the world, a variety of initiatives seek to redefine our relationship to food production and consumption, and embody the desire for a wider societal change (Pleysers, 2011). Far from being mere narratives of change, these food utopias (Stock, Carolan & Rosin, 2015) take the shape of concrete social experiments, transnational networks and practices. While they may not always be as innovative as they seem, these practices are always the expression of a critical statement towards productivism and consumerism. They turn food into a field of political engagement and provide positive narratives of change in a time of environmental catastrophism. These food utopias have now raised the attention of the medias, but also of big retailers who use a similar rhetoric to label an increasing number of food items as "sustainable", "ethical", "local", etc. As such, but also because they are now well organized within global networks, they now enjoy a growing celebrity and cannot be seen any more as a mere marginal phenomenon.

How do these food utopias translate and take shape in the context of Switzerland? What types of social experiments do they enact and on what type of critiques, moralities and political engagements do they rely? How, and at what level, can they play a role in the transition towards more just, healthy and sustainable food regimes? Taking an ethnographic and qualitative approach, this conference aims at documenting agri-food practices in Switzerland that perform and embody a critical stance on industrial and large-scale agriculture. We will shed light on the heterogeneity of these practices, examine their specificities and historicity with regard to the Swiss context, and analyse their potential to redefine the relation Swiss people have with their food. The notion of utopia will therefore not be used in its common understanding that refers to an elsewhere that does not exist, but rather as a heuristic "tool" (Stock, Carolan & Rosin, 2015:5) allowing us to take "seriously" alternative and critical agri-food practices. The “utopian” framing will draw our attention to their capacity to challenge conventional ways of relating to food, and to reopen spaces and imaginaries of other possible futures. At the same time, it will point to their ambiguities, contradictions and limitations.

Cited references


Utopies agro-alimentaires en Suisse

Pratiques et discours de transitions vers des systèmes alimentaires plus durables

Autrefois porteurs d'un grand espoir - celui d'éradiquer la faim et de rendre accessible à tous une large diversité de produits alimentaires - nos systèmes agro-alimentaires font désormais l'objet d'une critique populaire et médiatique grandissante pour leurs conséquences sanitaires, sociales et environnementales. En même temps, les questions alimentaires cristallisent tous les espoirs et sont perçues comme des leviers fondamentaux d'une transition vers un monde post-productiviste. Agriculture biologique, circuits courts (ACP), potagers urbains, permaculture, ou encore mouvements Slow Food ou de consom'acteurs, partout dans le monde, des initiatives cherchent à redéfinir notre rapport à la production et la consommation et incarne le désir d'un changement sociétal plus large (Pleyers, 2011). Loin d'être de simples récits porteurs d'espoirs, ces "utopies agro-alimentaires" ou food utopias (Stock, Carolan & Rosin, 2015) s'incorporent dans une diversité de pratiques, de réseaux et de dispositifs qui, s'ils ne sont pas toujours aussi innovants qu'il n'y paraît, sont en tous cas toujours l'expression d'un positionnement politique plus ou moins contestataire. Parce qu'elles incarnent à quoi pourrait ressembler le monde de demain, ces utopies jouissent désormais d'une certaine célébrité médiatique, d'autant plus importante que la grande distribution s'empare de référentiels semblables aux leurs (solidarité, proximité, qualité, durabilité, etc). Cette relative célébrité, doublée de leur capacité croissante à s'organiser en réseau, nous oblige ainsi à les appréhender au-delà d'un simple phénomène marginal.

Comment ces food utopias se manifestent-elles en Suisse ? Quelles formes d'expérimentations sociales recouvrent-elles et dans quels répertoires de critiques et type d'engagement politique s'ancrent-elles? Comment, et à quels niveaux, peuvent-elles contribuer à développer des modes de consommation et de production plus sains ou plus durables? A partir d'une approche ethnographique, cette conférence propose d'amorcer un état des lieux des pratiques agro-alimentaires suisses inscrites dans un positionnement critique face au système productiviste. Nous chercherons à en restituer l'hétérogénéité, à en comprendre l'historicité propre au regard du contexte helvétique, mais aussi à en apprécier le potentiel en matière de transformations du sens et du rapport que nous avons à l'alimentation. La notion d'utopie sera ainsi mobilisée non pas dans son sens classique pour se référer à un ailleurs qui n'existe pas, mais comme un "outil" heuristique (Stock, Carolan & Rosin, 2015) permettant de prendre au sérieux ces initiatives, à la fois dans leur capacité à mobiliser autrement et à rouvrir des espaces de pensée sur d'autres futurs possibles, mais aussi dans leurs limites, leurs contradictions, leurs contraintes.

Références citées


Keynote lecture

In Search of Good Farmers: Food Utopias, Care, and the Future of Food

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The current moment is one of worry and concern over collapse. While many still go hungry we’ve poisoned the waters, eroded our soil, sought shortcuts through biotech fixes, and continue to anticipate a future of food without farmers. Yet in the wake of disaster the new can emerge. Utopias provide us with tools of dialogue that communicate problems but also engender possible pathways forward. Food utopias offers a trialectic of critique, experimentation, and process to shape agri-food scholarship of the hopeful, care-centred stories of food and transformation. By drawing on examples from around the world this talk will both outline food utopias, but also offer an invitation to food utopias scholarship that can help broaden our understanding of justice and scholarship around food, farmers, community, and feeding the world.
Panel 1: Bringing agriculture in cities

> Imagining and practising the edible city in the canton of Geneva:
The class politics of urban food production

Marion Ernwein  
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Over the past ten years, the canton of Geneva offered fertile ground for food-related urban experiments, as urban farming and gardening were invested by grassroots groups and institutions. These activities, their spatialities, and their publics are however differently imagined and practised. Drawing upon interviews with municipal officials and grassroots activists, the paper looks at two cases to shed light on the multiple ways urban food production is being imagined, negotiated and experimented with, and to show how it is imbued with class relations. The first case is one where an institutional gardening project and a grassroots farming project compete with each other – I argue that a key to understanding this competition is the discursive opposition performed by institutional actors between the (supposedly) hip, niche activity of urban farming to (supposedly) more inclusive, low-skill (but also more manageable) practice of gardening. The second case relates to how gardening itself is imagined and negotiated, as two models of urban gardening – family and community gardens – are contrasted by institutional actors on aesthetic, ecological and moral grounds. The interminglement of class with urban food issues, I argue, should be taken more into account when assessing the potential of urban food growing to offer alternative, radical politics.

Literature

> Organizing Urban Agriculture: The Basel Example of Practice.

Isidore Walliman  
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The Urban Agriculture Network Basel (UANB) was founded in 2010 by the Social and Solidarity Economy Basel, itself founded in 1996. This presentation illustrates how UANB is organized to capture the energy of new social movements and to play an important role in Basel’s SSE development for local, social and ecological sustainability.
Panel 2: Redefining the relationship between consumers and producers

> New forms of solidarity economy? Re-visiting producer-consumer relations in 20th century Switzerland.

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The framework of this paper is the ongoing project “The importance of the solidarity economy for the development of organic farming in Europe, past and present” (2016 – 2018). We will present an outline of the project, focus on some of the institutionalised initiatives in Switzerland and then analyse the changing producer-consumer relations since the first wave of globalisation in the second half of the 19th century which produced a spatial, social and cultural gap between mainly rural based producers and increasingly urban consumers. While the extending processes of manufacturing and distribution of food in 20th century have even increased the gap, a multitude of actors and institutions has simultaneously tried to (re-)build new connections and relations between consumers and producers. We will focus on the discourses, institutions and practises of the multifaceted relations which can be observed since World War I. And we will discuss why some forms have triumphed and others became marginalised or have almost completely disappeared from public knowledge. By historicising and contextualising the different consumer-producer relations of today, we intend to reveal their potential for present day actors trying to create new forms of solidarity economies.

Literature


Contract, constraints and food as vectors of change in alternative food networks

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Local contract farming (LCF) initiatives are flourishing in Western Switzerland, they promote direct partnerships between producers and consumers based on a long term contractual relationship. They formulate and codify a promise of difference (Le Velly 2017) for their members that position themselves as “alternative” towards conventional food supply chains. Against a binary framing, we will explore this dialectical relation between alternative and conventional, by looking at processes of autonomisation and interdependencies. Based on ethnographic fieldworks within three initiatives, our presentation will show how this promise implies to re-invest the meanings of the producers – consumers relationship in terms of solidarity and proximity. Then we will question the reformulation of this relationship in the everyday practices of these networks and highlight the centrality of the contract as long-term commitment and regulated cooperation. Furthermore, this codification may generate practical constraints and a transfer of responsibilities to the consumers. We will explore the autonomisation produced in these networks not in terms of the production of neoliberal subjectivities but rather as producing potential forms of empowerment. At the core of these reconfigurations, lies food, which becomes an important actor in the process of mutual recognition, reappropriation and change. In this perspective, we consider LCF as a Food Utopia (Stock & al. 2015) in the way they promote and try to perform renewed and different relationships to food, from the production to the act of eating.

Cited references

Panel 3: Giving a new meaning to the act of producing and consuming

> La permaculture : au-delà de l'agriculture

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Les questions écologiques et sociales soulevées par la critique du modèle agricole industriel se traduisent par l'apparition de nouveaux courants agricoles comme l'agro-écologie ou l'agro-foresterie. Au sein de ces « alternatives », la permaculture fait figure de particularité. A la fois agriculture et culture de la permanence dans son sens large, elle a pour objectif de créer des systèmes humains à l'image des écosystèmes. Se réclamant à la fois de savoir-faire « traditionnels » et des sciences naturelles modernes, les concepts de la permaculture intègrent des paramètres sociaux dans « une méthode de design écologique ».

Des techniques multiples tels que les couvertures de sols, la polyculture, l'étagement de végétation ainsi que le refus du labour, de la mécanisation et des produits de synthèse permettent de conserver la fertilité des sols et la biodiversité. Ce mode de culture véhicule des représentations particulières du rôle de l'agriculteur. Lorsque le sol est considéré comme un organisme vivant, il devient impossible de l’exploiter et de le maltraiter. La gestion de son environnement s’apparente alors à une relation sociale entre humains et non-humains, favorisant une conception spécifique de la nature.

Publications :


> Citizen-consumers’ and food decision-making processes in Switzerland: often called upon, rarely influential?

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Worldwide processes of globalisation, neo-liberalisation and ecologisation have been accompanied by “grand narratives” underlying a new politics of food. Considered as key stakeholders for economic success and political legitimacy, citizen-consumers are presented as new centres of power. The contribution examines the extent to which the food governance context of Switzerland corresponds to this image by exploring four decision-making processes (differentiation of Swiss products, organic farming, carbon labelling, and regional branding). Three channels of citizen-consumers’ participation and influence are
identified: as images, through the mobilization of their interests, beliefs and preferences by other actors; as interest groups, through their representation by delegated actors; as acting individuals, through more direct forms of involvement. The cases unveil a paradox. On the one hand, citizen-consumers’ preferences are constantly put forward and the organisations defending their interests increasingly consulted. Consumer willingness to pay and food movements represent strong impulsions. On the other hand however, several obstacles are emphasized: a dilution whenever bottom-up initiatives are scaling up or crucial economic stakes are discussed; a risk of instrumentalisation; a strong asymmetry of power; a difficulty to weight on informal policy-making; a mainly delegated form of participation. In the end, consumer preferences, food movements or consumer organisations still have a limited influence in a closed and unequal decision-making system.

> Towards healthy and sustainable food consumption practices: the role of prescriptions

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Food consumption is a significant contributor to both health and environmental impacts – leading to the Swiss national research project to promote “healthy and sustainable diets” (SNSF, NRP69). Food consumption plays out in a social space populated by an ever-growing diversity of discourses and guidelines about what and how to eat, involving what can be termed food “prescriptions” (Plessz et al. 2016). In this paper, we explore the different prescriptions that are currently playing out in Switzerland – including conflicting prescriptions, but also synergies and overlaps. Further, we place existing prescriptions in relation to social practices, understanding the interplay between social representations, skills, routines, habits, and material settings, among other elements, as central to food consumption (Warde 2013; Halkier 2009). We argue that even if they are endorsed by consumers, prescriptions alone cannot induce change. To do so, they must be accompanied by a redefinition of other elements that constitute a practice, such as systems of provision, settings of consumption, competencies and skills, family structure, or time constraints. This approach allows us to grasp the complexity of the relation between prescriptions and practices, and the different dimensions at play in the transformation of food routines and habits.

Cited references:

Significant publications by co-authors:
L. Godin

M. Sahakian
Practical informations

Participation
No registration is needed to attend the conference and it is free of charge.

Venue
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MAP

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