

Reflections

Food in the future: Does futures studies have a role to play?

Karen Hurley*

School of Environmental Studies, University of Victoria, P.O. Box 1700, STC CSC, Victoria, BC, Canada V8W 2Y2

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Abstract

Futures studies (FS) has not taken up food as a topic to any degree perhaps because of complexity, gender, urban bias, professional bias, cultural diversity, and fear. But there is a need and responsibility for FS scholars and practitioners to consider the growing and preparation of food in our work. Today's movements in food security, organic farming and Slowfood can direct us towards futures based in healthy, diverse, and joyful communities.

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Why is there so little discussion by or amongst those of us in futures studies (FS) about food? There may be many reasons for this, including complexity, gender, urban bias, professional bias, cultural diversity and fear. Food is also such a personal issue that it can be too confronting to take on professionally. It was suggested to me that I should focus my doctoral work on food security because of my involvement in lobbying to protect agricultural land from urbanisation, and because I am on the Board of a community farm [1]—but I could not. To me food is deeply personal, and as a vegetarian I did not want to face the entire spectrum of food, nor the issues of treatment of animals in some situations. I could not face food squarely in my research but only tangentially through images in film. But somehow all of us need to move past the challenges and provide leadership in discussions about food in the future. I am confident that the FS community is suitably diverse, open enough, and supportive enough of each other's perspectives that we can think and write about food more often and within a spectrum of localised, alternative futures.

Complexities within the topic of food are broad and deep, and take us into the other topics and across many fields (both professional and the more literal soil-based). The complexities of food result from it being vital to life, invaluable to cultural heritage, a direct link between humans and non-human parts of ecosystems, and are therefore reflections of how we treat other beings and Earth; layered on top of all this is that food is fully commodified, from seed to table, by some of the largest conglomerates in the world. Food intersects the local with the global—the personal with the political. Take a look at the food that you have consumed in any one day and you will likely see a cross-section of local and distant sources—or perhaps if you are travelling and eating out at each meal you may have no idea where your food is from, which is also the case if your day includes semi-prepared food out of box (just where is that frozen pizza made anyway?).

*Tel.: +1 250 477 2290; fax: +1 250 472 1857.

E-mail addresses: kghurley@uvic.ca, karenhurley@shaw.ca (K. Hurley).

Thinking about food in the future is also challenging because of the ecological issues that put food security at risk, including water quality and availability, loss of agricultural land to urbanisation or desertification, loss of forest food sources to logging, climate change, and loss of soil health to use of pesticides and petroleum-based fertilisers, and the list could go on. These issues are complex in themselves, and not easy to solve, so we shy away from thinking about how the next generation will feed themselves, or we emotionally disconnect ourselves and write about potentials for food scarcity in the language of cold statistics as if there were not real people involved.

Gender imbalance in the FS, I believe, also contributes to the lack of attention placed on food within our field/non-field. Men still get most of the exposure in media coverage of future, write most of the books about futures, hold most of the professional posts dealing with futures (academic, government institutions from the local to the UN, consultants, corporate business). And let's face it; it is generally—but not always—women who are concerned on a daily basis with feeding the family or the community. So, thinking about food is not a top-of-mind issue for male FS scholars and professionals. I argue, as does Stephen Lewis [2], recently retired as UN Special Envoy for AIDS/HIV in Africa, that if women were in a position of shared power, children would not be going hungry in our world.

I suggest that within FS we avoid food as a topic also because of an urban bias that exists throughout much of contemporary society. Most of us live in cities, and are witnessing the on-going trend of people leaving an agricultural life and making their way into cities. Also, historically, as well as today, cities have been depicted as the place of culture, excitement, the home of intellectuals and “The Future”. Whereas rural areas are depicted as dull, cultureless and the home of less intelligent people. This simply is not true, and will become less and less true as people free themselves from meaningless work in noisy, busy cities, and re-claim a life of producing healthy food, enjoyment of quiet landscapes, and more intimate venues for cultural expression. Smaller communities may not have opera houses and 3000 person theatres but they have festivals with locally prepared food, smaller theatre venues, opportunities to hear and participate in music making of all kinds, and they are home to many poets, writers, filmmakers, intellectuals and musicians.

Food may also be missing as a major topic within FS practitioners because of a bias towards professionalism. The growing and preparation of food is devalued in contemporary society (unless you are one of those super star chefs like the foul-mouthed men from England who seem to be the flavour-of-the-month in Anglo-American media) because it is rural and the domain of women (today women represent the majority of food growers and preparers around the world). And technology and corporate business are valued—so that is where FS spends most of its efforts. The rare times when food is discussed within FS literature, it is often within the biotech debate (either side) while the many other facets that will affect food in the future are ignored. The bias of professionalism may also be affected by the reality that many in the FS world consider themselves an “expert” in something because they have worked in that field of technology (cars, computers, space travel, gadget production) or in a business milieu and they are most comfortable writing about their “expertise”. I would guess that very few FS folks have worked as farmers—so who are the farming “experts”? My worry is that this vacuum within FS is filled by corporate biotech voices, who seem to have endless funds for spreading their biased approach. Can we accept our non-expert status, be comfortable in complexity, and conduct FS that gains acceptance with our peers?

Perhaps food is also not written about or discussed very often within FS because of our fears of lack of food, or of food that is contaminated with agricultural pesticides or other environmental chemicals. It is simply too hard to face the possibility of there being inadequate food for one's family, or that the food we are serving them is unhealthy. And yet this is today's reality for many people around the world. Those of us in FS have an opportunity, and responsibility, to ensure that this contemporary reality does not repeat itself in the future. No parent should have to face the dilemma of whether to give a child a particular food or not because of the potential dangers in the food, and no child should go hungry.

We can participate in making change happen by looking to the positive movements and ideas in the present that will become trends in the future. There are many positive, community building, actions happening in the world which are providing hopeful indicators that the future of food can be different from the depressing scenarios of humans eating only food experiments that have been created by corporations, or of a future food

in the form of pellets (Soylent Green, anyone?). We can point to the positive movements in organic food production, in Slow Food inspiring people to reacquaint themselves with the gifts from the land and that celebrate food producers, in a renewed interest in cooking by many women and men, and in the increasing interest within universities around the world in food security and sustainability.

IFOAM, for example, is an international organisation whose mission is to be “leading, uniting and assisting the organic movement in its full diversity” which they accomplish through a network that is active in almost every country in the world [3]. Their recent research shows that nearly 31 million hectares of land is currently certified organic, and that in 2005 the global market of organically produced food was 25.5 billion euros. Increasingly, people are turning to organic food, because they know it is healthier for them, the farmers, and the Earth. IFOAM is providing a leadership function in futures thinking that we can learn from. Their conference in 2008 was titled *Cultivate the Future*, and they “believe that the contribution made by organic agriculture is fundamental for guaranteeing generations to come with a healthy, fair, correct environment for harmonious living that respects people and the earth”. The fair trade movement is intrinsic in the organic farming movement, which recognises that farmers and food producers should be paid fairly for the food they provide to their communities. Wherever you live, there are people producing food organically—and hopefully making a living wage from their efforts—it is worth listening to them when we are writing about futures. And read anything by Vandana Shiva, who has done much to protect localised seeds and provide a voice to farmers in India, before writing about food in the future because local diversity is vital to farmers, to environments, and to ending corporate control.

Futures studies can also look to the number of universities around the world that are offering increasingly diverse and numerous courses and programmes in food security and sustainability. There are great opportunities for interdisciplinary work on the diverse futures of food amongst FS researchers and across the many disciplines involved in food security.

The Slow Food movement [4], although critiqued by some as being elitist, is nevertheless contributing to local food security by connecting farmers and producers, like cheese, olive oil and wine makers, with the people who eat their food. They are also working around the world to protect and enhance food diversity. Our Canadian chapter, for example, has been instrumental in re-introducing a type of higher protein wheat, Red Fife, which was almost lost in the homogenisation of seeds across the prairies. Slow Food urges us to slow down and appreciate our food, surely a necessary lesson envisioning our futures, which are so often portrayed as manic busyness.

As futurists we can recognise the wisdom of Frances Moore Lappé, and now joined by her daughter Anna Lappé, who remind us that people do not go hungry because of scarcity of food but rather because of a *scarcity in “living” democracy* [5]. They define *living democracy* where “everyone has a say in their own futures, therefore, the right to life’s essentials, including food is protected”. In terms of food, this protection includes fairness in land tenure, seeds available for sharing and saving without fear of corporate interference, fair prices for farmers’ work, and local food security. Lappé and Lappé introduce readers to a model for *food as a right* in Belo Horizonte City, Brazil where thousands of people in the city are supported by the local government with healthy, locally grown food at produce stands, a community restaurant and produce vans in neighbourhoods that do not have markets; and farmers are supported with access to urban customers and are paid well for their produce [6]. The fact that children and adults live with chronic hunger around the world (yes, even in the wealthy North), and in the South die of hunger, is unacceptable and needs to be something that all futurists focus on ending.

Those of us in FS can also provide a leadership role in looking past the negative trends, not assuming a singular linear path towards the future, and create preferred futures where the growing and preparation of food is celebrated and honoured as important work in the world. We can envision food secure communities and regions, where we do not rely on complex transportation networks to provide all of our food. We can support those who are brave enough to research and write about food in our futures. We can participate in envisioning communities where healthy, local food is made available to all, grown by farmers who are happy, healthy and honoured, and where no person goes hungry. And we can use positive examples from the world today to challenge those who say it cannot be done. It can be done, and we can help in making it happen.

References

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