

COMMENTARY ON COVID-19 AND THE FOOD SYSTEM

The future of food after COVID-19 through the lens of anthropology

Marco Ginanneschi *
Finanza Futura Srl

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Pandemic



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Abstract

This commentary uses the lens of anthropology to imagine the consequences of COVID-19 for the food system. It explores the different cultural meanings of food and presents the pandemic as a social phenomenon. All of these elements suggest the possibility of a deep and widespread impact and urge economic actors to consider the broader context.

Keywords

Future, Food, COVID-19, Strategic Planning, Foresight, Anthropology

Food production and consumption are not immune to the COVID-19 phenomenon. We could be led to think this, however, given that even during the quarantine there were no interruptions in the food supply chain in Italy. However, the pandemic has claimed many victims and placed limitations on individual freedoms that are comparable to wartime. In isolation, food in Italy has become our positive obsession, a sort of authorized relief valve. In the confusion that this situation generates, even those who work professionally in the sector end up thinking in silos: farmers are worried by the lack of workers for the harvest, food industries by the increased standards of work safety, large-scale retailers by the social sensitivity of their role, and restaurants by the loss of revenues.

* Marco Ginanneschi, CEO, Finanza Futura Srl, Florence, Italy; ginanneschi.marco@alice.it

Author Note

An earlier version of this commentary (Ginanneschi, 2020) was published on April 29, 2020 at the peak of the pandemic in Italy, on the online bulletin of Accademia dei Georgofili, an Italian agriculture research institution established in 1753.

Yet, looking beyond the short term is important in order to make strategic decisions, to start investing, to innovate, and to adapt to a long coexistence with the virus. Since we are not in a situation comparable with any past crisis, we cannot rely on experience: the disruption that COVID-19 and the necessary containment measures have caused is without precedent in human history. What hypotheses can we formulate regarding the influence of the pandemic phenomenon on the future of food?

In waiting for more articulated contributions by strategic planning and foresight, it could be helpful to look at the reality in progress through the lens of anthropology (Peacock, 2001). We will focus briefly on the many cultural values of the concept of food in order to imagine holistically the possible consequences of COVID-19. In doing so, we will follow a classification of food meanings, elaborated by Mintz and Du Bois (2002) and conceived for an interdisciplinary use.

Let us firstly consider food in terms of *security*, that is, as an accessible resource, a means of support, and a human right sanctioned by the Universal Declaration of 1948. The challenge for mankind is reflected in the Expo 2015 slogan, “feeding the planet,” that is, satisfying the food demand of 8.5 billion humans in 2030 and 9.7 billion in 2050 (Godfray et al., 2010; United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division [DESA], 2019). The Food and Agriculture Organization of the U.N. (FAO) (2017) expressed optimism about the possibility of achieving this goal, under the condition that “vertically coordinated, more organized food systems” (p. xii) become available. The COVID-19 pandemic, which has already resulted in 17.8 million confirmed infections and 686,145 deaths worldwide (World Health Organization, 2020), however, challenges this plan. The spread of the virus to the poorest countries in the world increases the risk of generating serious famines with millions of victims. Even in more developed countries, obstacles to foreign workers’ cross-border commuting jeopardize harvests, while the working of restaurants at half-capacity penalizes fresh and high added-value products that often come from short supply chains. The picture would not be complete without considering another aspect of food security. Given the growing difficulties of obtaining supplies from abroad—since all global trade has slowed—agricultural produce is recovering its strategic and political values. National states could thereby claim their sovereignty over food production, not so much to protect local farming, but to defend a broader national interest (Friedmann, 1993). The calls to consume national products, at the expense of foreign ones, are already multiplying. Today’s food sovereigntists could be tomorrow’s protectionists. The damage to the world production capacity resulting from this action would be enormous and the poorest countries would pay the highest price.

Examining food as a *mirror of society* is another important analysis filter. In recent years, the social changes that food has incorporated have been innumerable: the tendency to eat out, the fast food boom, the mass production of processed foods, the spread of ready meals, the commodification and branding of food, for instance. COVID-19 poses a challenge to this food dimension. Social distancing measures, including the consequent reduction in the movement of people and the increase in smart working, will make catering and collective consumption more problematic, while favoring food preparation at home and online purchases. It is going to be a revolution in terms of ingredients, processing, packaging, and places of consumption. It is useful to remember that wars have often led to important and lasting changes in food consumption, and the economic impact of COVID-19, as time passes, is getting closer to that of a war conflict.

Even food as *identity*, a signifier of ethnicity and a sign of belonging to food groups or tribes, could undergo a transformation. The rebirth of borders and limitations to the movement of people for public health reasons, as well as the consequent sharp slowdown in foreign tourism, will favor ethnocentrism (the preference given to national foods). Production chains, which have lengthened as a result of globalization, will shorten again. On the other hand, traditional foods will be negatively affected by the lack of foreign tourism.

Finally, we should not forget the *ritual value* of food. The rite, a repeated act of approaching the sacred or the magical (De Martino, 1972), survived, albeit in a subdued way, in our increasingly secular conviviality. But COVID-19 can lead from a latency to a higher tendency of more than one phenomenon of this type. Think about the global spread of remote lunches and aperitifs hosted by WeParty, Zoom, Jitsi Meet and others, all new applications downloaded millions of times during the quarantine. This phenomenon of virtual conviviality undeniably has an eschatological component. When confronted with the threat of death and physical isolation, the human being tends to create salvific rituals that help restore his identity with respect to others, the sense of belonging to a group, and the social order. Purchases in large department stores and supermarkets already adjusted to this, with the emergence of new consumer trends. The legacy of COVID-19, one day, will also be measurable in these terms.

In conclusion, the widespread requirement for social distancing is definitely transforming this epidemic into a global event with ideological, political, and socioeconomic dimensions (Stark, 1977), which will deeply affect food as a cultural product.

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