Preface

In one section of his book *Crowds and Power* (1966), Elias Canetti[1] postulates that everything we eat is an instrument of power, while exemplifying this through two strong figures—chief and mother.

The chief, whether it be the king, president or *pater familias* whose 'full belly' could be viewed as charismatic while also evoking the imaginary and allegedly voracious ogre figure. This omnipotent ruler must be served first and his appetite may reassure those who are less well off but also provoke jealousy, which further underscores his privileged status. The chief's carnivorous appetite is always ready to lend itself to the ceremonial ritual of potlatch and other lavish gastronomic extravaganzas. Otherwise, Canetti refers to the mother from the standpoint of the dependencies arising from the nurturing monopoly mothers have claimed from the dawn of time. From mother's milk to daily food and festive meals, the mother figure is omnipresent in fulfilling the family's orality. Maternal power is wielded through the kitchen and its control. Beyond enthralled declarations, the nurturing mother further embodies the family members' dependency on the culinary flavours she masters. This role also puts her in a position of rivalry with regard to all 'foreign' foods—those made and eaten outside the home—which she may readily belittle at any opportunity.

Beyond these two highly individualized iconic food power figures, Elias Canetti also postulates that eating is the most selfish act there is. This leads us to reflect on individuality as an intractable dimension of eating. This rather iconoclastic approach has the advantage of shifting the focus onto the individual—the eater. This is what Audrey Soula, Chelsie-Yount André, Olivier Lepiller and Nicolas Bricas have done by gathering articles from Africa, Latin America and Asia, most of which are written—based on urban surveys—by researchers from these three continents.

Reading these twelve contributions highlights the extent to which until recently—in countries of both the Global North and South—studies on food practices have overlooked the eater, who is the main stakeholder when it comes to food. There are many reasons for this neglect or omission, but it has undoubtedly been dictated by

1. Canetti E., 1966, [1984]. Crowds and power. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. ISBN 0-374-51820-3.

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the different theoretical paradigms put forward and, with hindsight, the structuralist paradigm whereby both the 'raw and the cooked' were empirical 'candy' now comes to mind. It would be futile to hunt for interview extracts in the very substantial literature that this theory has generated where eaters describe the intimate sensations that eating this or that fruit or vegetable gave them. It would be just as hard to find descriptions of situations where an eater takes a symbolic initiative to pursue novel tastes. In the same spirit, if we consider the numerous studies influenced by Marxism, here too the food issue is viewed in terms of flows, supply and demand, of hopeless dominance relations, and of an enormous food transition hurdle. In short, while these approaches generate a mass of data, the model—be it symbolic, political or economic—is still the sought-after grail. While this remark applies equally to countries of the Global North and South, the absence of 'individual eaters' is clearly even more marked in studies on countries of the South, which are generally described by Western researchers. In this regard, in addition to the question of the paradigms mentioned, the urgency of food situations also (morally) keep us from focusing too heavily on food subjectivity. In postcolonial guilt settings, the issues of malnutrition, even famine or lean seasons were of more concern to researchers than relating the history of a dish or examining changes in urban catering patterns in an African capital city, for instance. This can be readily understood and the issue does not deserve criticism.

Yet times are changing and societies are becoming even more urbanized, as this book illustrates. Although malnutrition issues are still current in Africa, Asia and Latin America (in very different ways depending on the location), a generation of young researchers from these three continents have been trained in social sciences and are approaching these subjects with broader scope and more freedom. Indeed, everywhere in the Global North and South overly cumbersome theoretical paradigms have taken a back seat, which has undoubtedly legitimized curiosity regarding food subjectivities. The fact that the researchers are from these societies, and were actually born in the cities where they conducted their investigations (which is the case for most of the contributors to this book), has enabled them to have a more immediate and open view of situations to help grasp their complexities as compared to comforting models. And this rediscovery of complexity through subjectivities is perhaps also the final stage in an emancipation process or, in other words, an intellectual stage necessary for the decolonization of knowledge.

What does the city do to food practices and *vice versa*? To address these two aspects of the same question—as illustrated in the narratives presented throughout the book—this new generation of researchers takes us from city to city, but each is driven by his/her own curiosity.

In Oran and Casablanca, Algerian and Moroccan women are taking initiatives to reduce their dependencies which the city has not alleviated. In Baroda, a city in Gujarat (India), the Indian middle classes are devising intimate strategies to transform their mistrust of industrial dishes into confidence. In Mexico City and Guadalajara, Mexicans are being subjected to the paradoxical injunction of having to give heritage value to dishes that do not meet health standards. In the restaurants of Lomé (Togo) and the streets of Brazzaville (Democratic Republic of the Congo), multicultural cuisine is being effortlessly invented while affecting urban social cate-

gories seeking distinction as well as migrants who have become city-dwellers in survival mode. In Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso), we see the difficulties that may arise in turning a traditional dish (*tô*) into heritage but which for many remains a symbol of poverty. Conversely, in Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire), in opposition to all of the nutritional norms disseminated, people defiantly insist on eating *garba*, i.e. a piece of tuna bathing in blackish oil! In Jakarta (Indonesia), informal food outlets allow people without any nearby family resources to benefit from a mutual socialization venue, while in the cities of Malaysia, single migrants from rural communities are forced to make do and symbolically comfort themselves with the multiethnic culinary dishes of the Malaysian urban sphere. In Chinese cities, industrial sweet beverages appear to be gaining ground despite resistance underpinned by the local symbolic fabric. In Yaoundé and Douala (Cameroon), children's food socialization subtly (and freely) melds Western norms and local knowledge. Otherwise in Mexico City, families living in a food shortage situation develop symbolic survival strategies whereby they reinvent so-called 'traditional' recipes by diverting cheap industrial food products.

The picture created by these researchers is clearly far removed from a well-defined and reassuring village monograph. The normative disorder of the cities into which they immerse us cannot be reduced to any kind of normlessness. On the contrary, the eating practices they meticulously observe reveal cities that are vehicles of intertwined social injunctions. These food injunctions are often contradictory or paradoxical and the norms seem less static and codified, as well as more volatile than in the village, whereas they shape food practices. They nevertheless do not prevent city eaters—out of necessity and pleasure—from constantly breaching state or parastatal norms and, more generally, from inventing alternative ways of eating. Sydney Mintz said that one of the (unresolved) contradictions that emerges from most food research is the fact that populations are highly attached—in an almost conservative way—to their food practices, while at the same time being open to change, even to spectacular and rapid change. The narrative conveyed in this book helps make this contradiction less steadfast.

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