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SITOPIA

How food shapes civilisation

Carolyn Steel

The question of how to eat has always been central to human life. Our evolution has mirrored a series of technical innovations such as the control of fire, farming, and railways that have transformed, not just how we eat, but how we live. Our ancestors understood the value of food, but modern urban life has obscured the true costs of how we eat. By externalising the cost of industrial farming, we have damaged planetary ecosystems and thus threatened our future on earth. By recognising and restoring food's true value, however, we can rebalance our lives with nature and create more resilient, equitable societies for the future.

Keywords: **food**, **cities**, **sitopia**, **society**, **civilisation**.

EATING GRAIN

> How to eat bread, Enkidu knew not, how to drink ale,
> he had never been shown.
> —*The epic of Gilgamesh.*

The importance of food in shaping civilisation is hard to overstate. Food's relative invisibility in the modern world has obscured its profound influence over our bodies, habits, homes, cities, landscapes, economy, and climate, yet nothing else has shaped our lives so powerfully. We live in a world shaped by food: a place I call *sitopia* (from the Greek *sitos*, "food", + *topos*, "place"), yet due to our failure to value food properly, the way we eat now threatens our very existence. Climate change, mass extinction, soil degradation, diet-related disease, and pandemics and are just some of externalities of the way we now feed ourselves.

The question of how to eat has been central to human life from the start, and for our earliest ancestors, the answer was essentially to hunt and gather. Early humans lived in small bands, moving with the seasons and taking what nature could offer them as they went. Such a peripatetic existence meant that, for most of human history, home was a territory, rather than a specific place to which people returned each day.

A profound change to this arrangement came around 1.5 million years ago, with a discovery described by Darwin as «probably the greatest ever made by man, excepting language» (Darwin, 2004, p. 68). That discovery was the control of fire, which allowed our forebears to start cooking their food and thus take on calories more quickly, which in turn allowed them to specialise in hunting, radically improving their diet and expanding their brains. Life around the hearth marked the beginnings of home as we now know it: the creation of a specific spot around which people could gather to warm themselves, share food, and tell stories. The shared meal was the first economy ever invented and remains our most important social ritual: one in which we all partake

«Due to our failure to value food properly, the way we eat now threatens our very existence»

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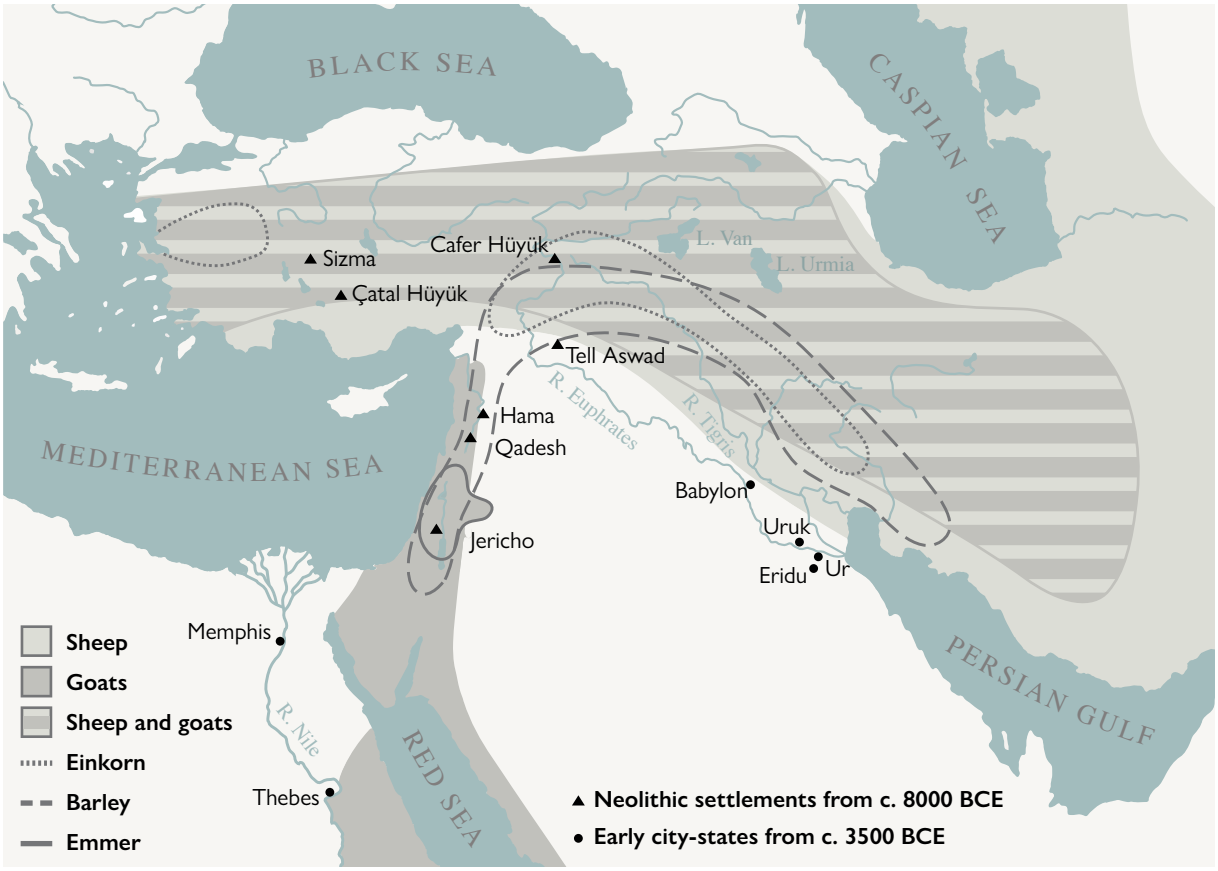


The Fertile Crescent, where farming and cities began. Starting around 12,500 years ago, settled communities began to establish themselves around such cultivated fields in the ancient Near East (and shortly thereafter in the Indus Valley), until some – Sumerian city-states that flourished in ancient Mesopotamia around 3500 BCE – grew large and complex enough to be considered cities.

and one whose vital significance we all intuitively understand.

The control of fire made humans social beings, but more than one million years would pass before another invention would turn us into urban ones. That innovation was agriculture: a radical new way of producing food that involved the saving, planting, nurturing, and harvesting of seed, turning the old peripatetic existence on its head. Unlike hunting and gathering, in which one moves from place to place, farming requires one to invest in a patch of land and then stay put to look after one's crops until they can be harvested. From around 12,500 years ago, settled communities began to establish themselves around such cultivated fields in the ancient Near-East (and shortly thereafter in the Indus Valley), until some – Sumerian city-states that flourished in ancient Mesopotamia around 3500 BCE – grew large and complex enough to be considered cities.

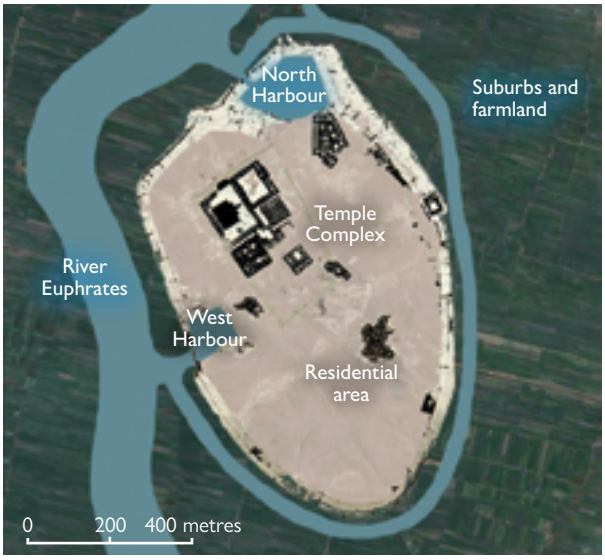
Life in such cities revolved around grain and the all-important annual harvest. The temples organised year-long programmes of festivals that echoed the agricultural seasons as well as organising the harvest itself, bringing in the grain, storing it in their granaries and baking it into bread for redistribution throughout the year. As the quote above from 4,000-year-old Sumerian poem *The epic of Gilgamesh* (George, 1999) suggests, bread and ale were quintessential urban foods. The *Epic* recounts how Enkidu, a wild creature sent by the gods to confront the King of Uruk Gilgamesh, must first be civilised by learning how to eat bread and drink ale – foods previously unknown to him. In the ancient world, eating grain and being civilised were seen as one and the same: to Homer, humans were, quite simply, «bread-eaters», and the Roman *cultus* gave us both *cultivation* and *culture*.

ROME: BREAD AND CIRCUSES

Early cities were able to feed themselves with some ease due to their relatively diminutive size, yet the opposite was true of ancient Rome. The world's first metropolis with a population of one million by the first century CE, Rome's appetite came to define

it in many ways, driving the relentless expansion and increasing political tensions that came with the task of satisfying it. The first city to totally outgrow its local hinterland, Rome already relied on grain imported from Sicily and Sardinia by the third century BCE, and by its height was importing grain, oil, wine, ham, honey and, *liquamen* (a fermented fish sauce) from across the Mediterranean, Black Sea and North Atlantic coasts. Rome pioneered a way of feeding itself that we would now call *food miles*: a strategy made possible by its mastery of the seas, over which it was much easier – and around forty times cheaper – to transport food than it was overland (see Morley, 1996).

Up to one third of Roman citizens were fed on a monthly grain ration known as the *Annona*, which, alongside public entertainments held in the Colosseum and elsewhere, gave rise to the famous dictum «bread and circuses». The *Annona* was essential in maintaining public order, yet its expense was considerable: Cicero reckoned it cost the state one fifth of all its revenue. As successive emperors acknowledged, however, feeding their citizens was their most urgent task, one which (as is the case with modern China) required the constant conquest of new lands. Augustus' celebrated victory over Egypt – the capital's breadbasket for several centuries – earned him enduring popularity; as Tacitus noted, Augustus had «won over the people with bread» (Tacitus quoted in Brunt, 1974, p. 102). Julius Caesar's efforts to curb the numbers receiving the *Annona* had a less warm reception, however; creating the civil unrest that ultimately led to his downfall.



Source: Drawn by the author, from a map by Sir Leonard Woolley

Map of the of the ancient city of Ur, circa 2000 BCE, situated on the bank of the Euphrates River. Life in these early Sumerian city-states revolved around the cultivation of grain. The temples planned the annual festivals according to the agricultural seasons and also organised the great harvest: collecting the grain, storing it, preparing the bread for distribution, etc.

«In ancient Greece, eating a *friendship meal* meant forming a bond akin to becoming part of the family»

ATHENS: THE POLITICS OF SHARING

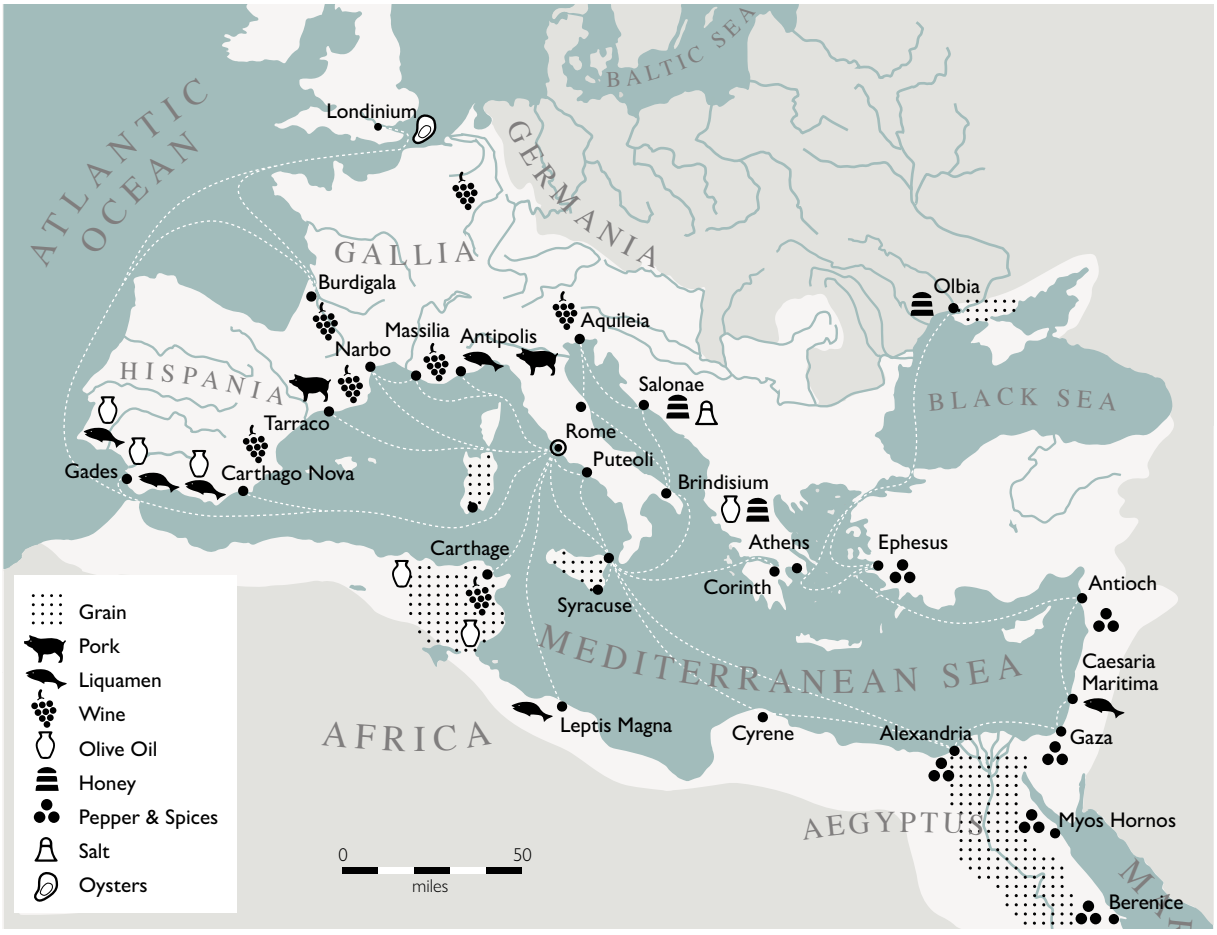
Food, as such events suggest, is inherently political. Yet while early urban leaders took responsibility for feeding their people, those of the Athenian *polis* (city-state) took a different approach, suggesting that citizens might feed themselves from their own farms in a system known as *oikonomia*, or "household management". Both Plato and Aristotle favoured such an arrangement, since it would render the *polis* self-sufficient, and thus politically independent. In order for such a system to work, however, both men agreed that the ideal city should remain relatively small – an idea that would become embedded in much subsequent utopian thinking.

In a democracy in which food was highly valued, the question of how to share it was deeply political. Just as modern ones do, ancient Greek diners had an individual serving of bread (*sitos*) at table that they dipped into a series of shared dishes known as *opson*: the equivalent of today's taramasalata or hummus. Then, as now, people had to trust their fellow diners not to take too much of the shared dishes; to be an *opsophagos* ("*opson*-lover") was considered a sign that one was of dubious character and could be enough to ruin a political career.

Sharing food politely has always mattered in human society; indeed, our hunter-gatherer ancestors' meals around the fire were the crucible in which society itself was formed. As the word *companion* (from Roman *com*, "with", + *panes*, "bread") suggests, breaking bread with someone implies the creation of a friendship, and in ancient Greece, eating a *friendship meal* meant forming a bond akin to becoming part of the family, with a vow never to fight in battle. The symbolism associated with the sharing of food can mean the difference between life and death.

PARIS: BREAD AND POLITICS

Nowhere has the symbolic power of food been more evident than in pre-revolutionary Paris. By 1750,



The food supply routes of Ancient Rome. By its height, Rome was importing grain, oil, wine, ham, honey, and *liquamen* (a fermented fish sauce) from across the Mediterranean, Black Sea, and North Atalantic coasts. Rome was the first city to totally outgrow its local hinterland, so it adopted a strategy of importing food from overseas.

Source: Drawn by the author

Paris was dubbed the «New Rome», with 650,000 citizens to feed, yet with no easy access to the sea to help it do so. In response, the Parisian authorities created an unwieldy hierarchy of officials known as the «grain police», headed up by no lesser figure than the King himself, the «baker of last resort». A series of «provisioning crowns» were set up around Paris, the innermost of which was legally obliged to grow nothing but grain for the city, and all of which were expected to feed the capital, by force if necessary. As one might imagine, this approach was far from popular, since in bad harvest years – which could come as often as one in three – rural people needed their grain just as much as their urban counterparts.

Just as those of Rome had done, the Parisian authorities recognised the political necessity of feeding their people: one minister called it «the most essential object that must occupy the administration» (Kaplan, 1984, p. 24). But without easy access to imported grain, the authorities' options were limited.

«With a population of one million by the first century CE, Rome's appetite came to define it in many ways»

They decreed that all transactions should take place in the open and the hoarding of grain was forbidden, with millers and bakers prevented from engaging in one another's trades in order to prevent monopolies.

In practice, however, roughly one-third of all Paris' grain was traded on the black market, through a network of illegal corn exchanges held in taverns and farms, supplied by illegal granaries set up in institutions such as convents and hospitals. Merchants, millers and bakers vied for control of the bread supply, with millers dealing in grain and bakers milling their own flour. Although the grain police were aware of such practices, they were powerless to stop them; their only choice was to turn a blind eye to the very practices it was their duty to prevent.

The final crisis came during the 1780s, when a string of poor harvests led to food shortages, for which the king was blamed. Market porters from Les Halles led the mobs, blaming the «baker of last resort» for failing to feed his people. Louis XVI tried to flee Paris, but was apprehended and brought back to the city, where he was summarily tried and executed. As an example of why political leaders throughout history have loathed being in charge of the food supply, one needs to look no further.

LONDON: «NOBODY DOES IT»

As the food histories of Uruk, Athens, Rome, and Paris suggest, the geographical constraints shaping cities have often had deep political consequences, showing how powerfully food has combined the forces of geography, economy, culture and politics to shape civilisation.

Musée Carnavalet, Histoire de Paris

A 17th century engraving showing river barges crowd Paris' main grain port at the Grève, looking toward Pont Marie. The lack of easy access to imported grain made it a difficult task to feed its 650,000 citizens by 1750. During the 1780s, a string of poor harvests led to food shortages and, ultimately, to the French Revolution and the king being executed.

«Parisian authorities created an unwieldy hierarchy of officials known as the "grain police", headed up by the King himself»

John Ogilby, *A large and accurate map of the city of London* (1676)

John Ogilby's map of London in 1676, shaded to show food markets and supply routes. Despite being one of the seventeenth century's largest cities, London never struggled to feed itself. For Adam Smith, father of classical economics, London's approach to feeding itself demonstrated what he called «perfect competition».

In these terms, London was always something of an outlier. Despite being one of the seventeenth century's largest cities and the first to reach a population of two million, London never struggled to feed itself. Blessed with a navigable river, it was always able to import as much food as it needed (a vital attribute for a northern Roman outpost) and by the ninth century was already importing much of its grain from the Baltic. In contrast to Paris' impoverishment of its local hinterland, London enriched local market towns such as Faversham, Maidstone, and Henley-on-Thames, which all thrived as corn exchanges feeding the capital.

The comparison between London and Paris did not escape the attention of Adam Smith, for whom London's approach to feeding itself demonstrated what he called «perfect competition»: the forces of supply and demand left to their own devices. In his *Wealth of nations*, Smith argued that cities create natural markets that operate through the «hidden hand» of mutual self-interest, obviating the need for any formal system to control them. His theory would become the foundational text of classical economics, espousing the now-familiar principle of free trade.

By the mid-nineteenth century, London was the capital of a global empire to rival that of Rome. Yet unlike its ancient predecessor, the city relied entirely on a «hidden hand» to ensure that it was fed, as the contemporary historian George Dodd noted:

> It is useless to ask by what central authority, or under what controlling system, is such a city as London supplied with its daily food. «Nobody does it». No-one for instance, took care that a sufficient quantity of food should reach London in 1855, for the supply of

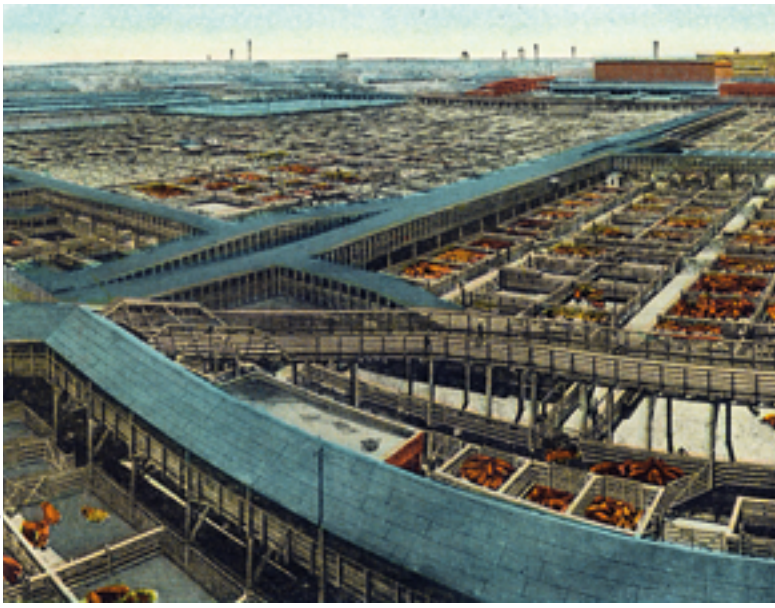
> two millions and a half of human beings during fifty-two weeks. And yet such a supply *did* reach London. (Kaplan, 1984, p. 2)

By Dodd's day, London's foodways had barely changed for centuries; yet that was about to change. The coming of the railways was set to revolutionise, not just how cities were fed, but urbanity itself. The fact that food could be transported rapidly over great distances emancipated cities from geography, meaning that, for the first time, they could grow more or less any size, shape or place. But the most consequential transformation was arguably that of the New World, and especially the American Great West, a vast open prairie roamed by tens of millions of bison and several Native American tribes, which within a decade of the railroads' arrival in 1827 had been slaughtered or removed to reservations to create the largest expanse of grain production the world had ever seen.

CHICAGO, EMPORIUM OF THE WORLD

All railroads led to Chicago, a city destined by its strategic position to become the «Emporium of the World» – and the birthplace of the modern food industry. With an unprecedented flow of grain arriving in the city, Chicago stockmen came up with the novel idea of feeding the surplus to cattle, giving rise to the new mainstay of the industrial urban diet: cheap meat. By 1870, Chicago's Union Stock Yards employed 75,000 people and processed three million head of cattle a year. Although the city's meatpackers slaughtered and butchered the cattle with ruthless efficiency, they nevertheless faced a problem: how to get the carcasses to lucrative East Coast markets in an edible state. One of the biggest packers, Gustavus F. Swift, solved the problem by building a refrigerated railway supplied with depots of ice, blocks of which were hung at both ends of the trucks to keep the meat fresh. Swift thus pioneered what we now call the *chill-chain*: the refrigerated supply routes that are so pivotal to modern food delivery. With aggressive marketing and cut-throat prices, Swift soon persuaded Bostonians and New Yorkers to abandon their traditional local butchers in favour of anonymous beef slaughtered hundreds of miles away: the age of cheap meat had truly arrived.

With their logistical mastery, efficiencies of scale, and ruthless business practices, Chicago's packers effectively established the ground rules for the modern food industry. Today, consolidation is the name of the game across the world, with just four meatpackers (including JBS-Swift) controlling 85 % of US beef production and agri-food giants such as Nestlé, PepsiCo, and Unilever enjoying annual turnovers that



Postcard, origin unknown

The establishment of Chicago Union Stock Yards led to the invention of cheap meat. By 1870, Chicago's Union Stock Yards employed 75,000 people and processed three million head of cattle a year. Today, just four meatpackers control 85 % of US beef production.

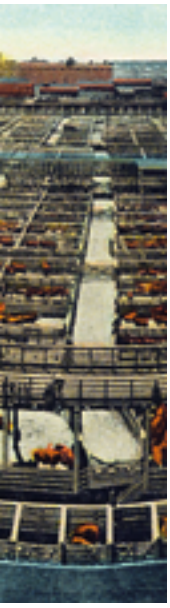
«By 1870, Chicago's Union Stockyards employed 75,000 people and processed three million head of cattle a year»

far exceed many national GDPs (Nestlé's sales in 2019 were worth $97 billion; Nestlé, 2020). Such Big Food behemoths demonstrate what ancient political leaders had always known: control of food is power.

Today in many parts of the world, the line between food and politics has become blurred, with a «revolving door» between government and Big Food that can have grave ecological consequences. When Jair Bolsonaro came to power in Brazil, for example, he lost no time in accelerating deforestation in the Amazon and appointing his cattle-rancher friends to government (see, for example, Phillips, 2019). A century and a half after the invention of «cheap food», modern agribusiness represents one of the gravest threats to our future on the planet.

EFFECTS OF GOOD GOVERNMENT

Today, the question of how to eat is hugely complex, involving everything from ecology, politics, and economics to culture, values, and identity. Yet what is increasingly clear is that the food system can no longer be left to the vagaries of the free market. We have entered a neo-geographical age and can no longer



Ebenezer Howard's Garden City: an unrealised utopia. Howard argued that a network of cities of limited size surrounded by farmland could provide the benefits of city and country living, while negating the downsides of both.

SOURCE: Howard, E. (1903). *Garden cities of to-morrow*. Sonnenschein publishing

«It is increasingly clear is that the food system can no longer be left to the vagaries of the free market»

afford to externalise the true costs of what we eat. After decades of «leaving it to Tesco», our politicians must accept the responsibility that their predecessors took for granted: that of feeding their people.

Since food is central to our chances of living well, it seems reasonable to expect it to be central to political thinking; and by extension, to the question of how we use, share, and inhabit land. Five and a half millennia into our experiment in urban living, nothing essential has changed. We still depend on nature for our sustenance, and our greatest collective responsibility is to maintain a balance between society and nature. We need to put the *oikonomia* back into economics: to revalue land and its most essential product, food. Revaluing food could be our most direct route towards creating a more equitable, resilient world.

As utopians from the Greeks onwards have recognised, this means achieving a balance between city and country. Perhaps the most famous image of this – Ambrogio Lorenzetti's 1338 fresco, *The allegory of the effects of good government* – depicts the medieval city-state of Siena, its urban and rural halves in perfect, productive harmony. Had Siena's councillors glanced up during one of their meetings, its message would have been clear: look after your countryside, and it will look after you.

The idea was reworked for the railway age by Ebenezer Howard in his 1902 plan for a Garden City. Recognising our human need both for society and nature, Howard argued that a network of cities of limited size surrounded by farmland could provide the benefits of city and country living, while negating the downsides of both (Howard, 1965). The Garden City was, in effect, a prototypical city-state, in which all land would be owned by the residents in the form of a trust, so that when land values rose, it would be the citizens, not private landowners, who would benefit. In an era when we need to find ways of living well within our ecological means, such ideas have much resonance.

More than any other substance, food symbolises our human journey, from our hunter-gatherer origins, through centuries of farming to becoming a predominantly urban species. The struggle to get «civilised» and the inherent costs of that transition have dominated our lives for millennia, and are likely to do so in future. Wherever our journey takes us next – whether it sees us lean increasingly towards technological solutions or return towards living more closely with nature and the rediscovery of the pleasures of growing our own food, craft skills, sharing and community – the most potent symbol of our progress will be how we choose to answer that simple, yet most complex of questions, how to eat.

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