

## Chapter 21

### **Conclusion**

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ICREFH's mission is to organize symposia and publications – this book is the ninth in the series – aimed at understanding European food in all of its aspects (cultural, social, economic, political), as it has changed over the last 250 years. Our approach is avowedly international and inter-disciplinary and we regard this as a strength, since it gives our deliberations 'hybrid vigour'.<sup>1</sup> The coordination of scholarship is essential in any such enterprise and we hope that the reader will have found a harmony of voices rather than a cacophony.

In this short final section we will not attempt to summarize the book's argument. Instead this is a good place to lay out a number of thoughts on the future of European food history in the short-term. The first is the somewhat dispiriting conclusion that there is still a need to argue the case for food history. Its neglect is due to the common observation that food lies in the realm of the everyday and therefore it is in danger of seeming too banal for serious academic analysis. This applies at every stage of the food chain, including the invisibility of the restocking of supermarkets at night time, the de-skilling of kitchen tasks as we prefer to heat up ready meals in the microwave, and the modern lack of attention to family meals and the convivial enjoyment of food. There is always something more important to do than spend time on food. ICREFH rejects the trivialization of this most fundamental aspects of life and we strongly assert the importance of research on food history. In recent years enthusiasm has been generated by food writers, cooks and popular food historians, and we welcome the impetus they have given. However, we have some doubts about the (understandable) elitism of their emphasis upon recipes from 'superior' cuisines. This sells magazines and cookery books, and makes good television, but the selection of material is eclectic and tends to ignore, firstly, the inconvenient complexity of variations across space and of change through

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<sup>1</sup> It is understandable perhaps that not everyone shares our view. Critics of edited volumes of this sort usually complain of miscellany, but we have rather been accused of an alleged excess of 'unity of concerns, approaches and interpretations'. Spary, 2005, 768.

time, and, secondly, it neglects the broader economic and social context in which historical analysis must be set. By contrast, ICREFH's investigations have always aimed for greater depth and fuller understanding of the nature of changing food habits in the wider, mainstream sense of affecting whole populations.

Second, while our studies here of individual cities have yielded many valuable insights, we are well aware of the need for comparative history in order to understand similarities and differences of experience. This may take the form of a commentary on a case study in its more general context, as with the paper by Nicolau-Nos and Pujol-Andreu where Barcelona is seen relative to Spanish and general European trends, or it may be a direct comparison of two cities, as in Atkins's study of London and Paris. Comparative history has its limits, though, as understood eighty years ago by Marc Bloch, but its recent incarnation as *histoire croisée* is highly promising. This relies upon pragmatic and reflexive induction and is well-suited to food history.<sup>2</sup>

Comparative history depends upon the time-scale of cultural change. Since 1989, ICREFH's symposia have shown how industrialization and urbanization are fundamental in changing the domestic environment and patterns of food consumption. Their effects on food-processing technology, on food distribution and retailing systems, have transformed products, outlets and places for (and times of) eating food. Many such changes are the result of marketing by international or multinational companies with the aim of expanding their global markets. In this respect, the initiation of change and its leadership has been external to Europe, since marketing dynamics originated principally in the United States of America. In Europe, a major theatre of war twice in the twentieth century, access to this 'western' food culture has depended upon political regimes, foreign influence, and even occupation, as well as national cultures. When artificial barriers to change have been removed, such as the demise of communist regimes in central and eastern Europe, there has been accelerated short-term catch-up to match western Europe. Large food processors and major retailers, such as British and French supermarket chains, are leaders in the introduction of 'fusion' foods and 'functional' foods to European consumers. By crossing cultural boundaries, or claiming special

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<sup>2</sup> For more on comparative history and *histoire croisée*, see Sewell, 1967; Segal, 2001; Kocka, 2003; and Werner and Zimmermann, 2006.

health-giving attributes, these foods are gaining a growing acceptance as part of the European diet in the twenty-first century. This is a compelling reason for studying food history now that policymakers across Europe are beginning to express concern at health problems.

Third, the depth and quality of archival materials varies between European states, partly due to the local history of bureaucracy and partly as a result of the destructive impact of war and weeding due to lack of storage space. In addition, one is left with the feeling that the unevenness of the general food history literature is a function of levels of interest in each nation, possibly culturally filtered. ICREFH has compiled a list of some 500 food historians, revealing real national differences: 116 of them are based in France and 102 in Germany, but only 42 in the United Kingdom. This raises the question of who will write the detailed histories of underrepresented regions, and there is a clear responsibility of international organizations such as ICREFH to encourage scholarly effort across the whole continent.

Finally, the methodological approaches and theoretical perspectives have varied in ICREFH symposia. We celebrate this variety, but we believe that further strength in European food history might be gained from working increasingly in teams, with sets of research questions that allow collaboration and comparison of results. In addition, there is a need for closer attention to definitions. This was clear, for instance, during the symposium session discussing ‘eating fashions – the consumer perspective’, where the question was raised as to the definition of a luxury product or a fancy food, and whether this should be on sociological, historical, legislative or financial grounds. Critical reflections upon such definitions and upon theoretical underpinnings are important tasks for the future.

ICREFH’s immediate research agenda<sup>3</sup> concerns the twentieth century, during which nutritional problems have changed from under-consumption and poor physical development to over-consumption, with sedentary over-weight populations becoming widespread across Europe. During the second half of the century, the supply of food products became progressively more industrialized and the availability of ready-prepared foods grew spectacularly. With international travel and large population movements a

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<sup>3</sup> For Oslo Symposium, 2007.

feature of life in Europe, experience of foreign foods and cuisines has increased but cooking skills declined. Industrialized foods have replaced home-cooked traditional or regional dishes, so that while consumers have benefited from the increased range of foods and ready meals in the shops, the reaction to this mainstream trend is already evident in health issues and the demand for organic foods. At the beginning of the twenty-first century: 'Food can not be enjoyed indiscriminately any more'.<sup>4</sup> Food history has much explaining to do.

## References

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<sup>4</sup> Hartog, 2005, 290.