

Clean Slate

Values for money: rethinking the food system

Few people know more about food than Professor Tim Lang. Peter Harper, CAT's Head of Research and Innovation, put some questions to him.

PH: One of your most influential books has been *Food Wars*. Why 'Food Wars'?

TL: You have to go back to the period just after the Second World War when memories of food shortages and supply disruptions caused acute anxiety. There was wide agreement worldwide that we just had to have much more, and much cheaper, food. It was accepted that the state should take the lead and promote investments in agricultural technology. In the book we called this approach 'productionism' to emphasise how, across the food supply chain, there was unity about the need to increase production and remove blockages everywhere.

In its own terms, productionism worked. More food was produced; shelves groaned with choice; prices dropped. UK households now spend less than 10% of their income on food, compared with 25% in 1950. A hiccup occurred in the early 1970s with an oil crisis (sound familiar?) but then productionism was saved by the Green Revolution, a combination of agrichemicals and new plant breeding which boosted output. This turned food-poor countries like India into net exporters. So faith in productionism was and is all very understandable, given how the problem was couched: a lack of

food. But even as productionism appeared to be succeeding, its downsides gradually started to dawn on us all: the accumulating environmental damage; the health effects of over- and mal-consumption; the almost total dependence on oil; and the unbalanced diets and warping of food culture.

PH: What are the main arguments?

TL: The phrase 'food wars' was coined to indicate the long period we have been in where tensions in and about productionism and the direction of the food system is being fought out. Evidence about productionism's harm began to get solid from the 1970s. And here we still are, engaged in serious debate about what a good food system is or could be.

At stake is who eats, how, when and where and what the impact of the food system is on present and future capacities. While the food wars have been waged, power has been transformed. The capacity of governments has altered, and that of the private sector, egged on by the neoliberal policies of the Reagan/Thatcher era, has grown. Food is dominated by huge transnational food corporations, the mass-retailers, and their



Tim Lang

infrastructure, not least to chemical-biotech or Life Sciences industries which control plants and wield astonishing power through intellectual property rights. Their project was of course principally to make money, but they also thought they could solve the problems of under-production.

PH: How?

TL: Critics of current food often demonise just GM or the Green Revolution. Life sciences thinking is more than that. Today, huge

investment has gone into dietary supplements, ‘nutriceuticals’, weight-management products that could offset some of the deleterious health effects.

Money has also gone into crop and stock efficiency through biotech interventions; fertiliser reduction and maintained pesticide use through GM; irradiation as a technical fix for poor food hygiene; lots of avenues. The Life Sciences have been unleashed to try to produce tailored products for particular sectors of the population. So we still have the ‘old’ processed food products, but new ones as well, with greater added value. You solve the problems but create new ones, and opportunities to continue to make money.

PH: That all sounds familiar but slightly sinister. Is that because we are just Old Fashioned lefties of a certain era?

TL: I don’t think this is a plot. Read the tracts and books and journals of the past and you’ll find strong arguments for going down this route: progress through technology, the ending of the burden of paying high prices for food, ending hunger. These weren’t plots but one recipe for addressing real social let alone food problems. It’s rational in its own terms, but it isn’t very ‘joined up’ from what we know today. The supposed ‘solutions’ might well ameliorate an immediate problem, but usually at the cost of increasing other problems elsewhere in the system. But perhaps this is not surprising if the whole food system is left to the private sector. Markets don’t do ‘joined up’ very well.

PH: What’s the ‘correct’ alternative, in your view?

TL: It’s what we called the Ecologically Integrated Paradigm (EIP). It tries to integrate the requirements of nutrition, farming, health and biodiversity with a restored role for state regulation in standing up to vested interests, plus a lot of democratic empowerment for consumers. A lot of it you’ll be familiar with – mixed organic farming, promotion of balanced diets, deliberate regulation of unhealthy foods, connecting producers and consumers, shortening the supply chains, relocalisation, fair trade, encouraging home production of fruit and vegetables. And so on. This picture is motherhood and apple pie to some sections of society, but it too has risks and challenges. My colleagues and I generally favour the EIP approach but are particularly troubled by its social positioning: it is championed by the affluent but aspired to right across the social spectrum. It does imply raised food costs, arguing that this saves in the end. But that’s problematic in good economic times, let alone recession like now.

PH: Yes...are we getting anywhere, do you think? What’s the balance of forces? Why doesn’t everybody go for the more ecological approach?

TL: Ecological thinking is complex. But my colleagues and I are particularly interested in the cultural aspects of food rather than the technical; not that the latter aren’t important – it matters hugely what sustainable agriculture can produce. But ultimately change comes if the people – in all our splendid variety – change. And here, the last 60 bountiful years, the Age of Cornucopia in western societies, have meant that we’ve all got used to the way things are. People have got locked into and fond of what might be called a

‘deracinated food culture’, a way of eating that is disconnected from production. This is both the triumph and fault-line of productionism, the sheer colossal scale and spectacle of the thing. When you think about how much has changed – kids now think pizza and curry are British! It’s pretty astounding. And of course, food vested interests are caught too. Half, they don’t want things to change too much, and will work hard to prevent it. In the UK they invest c£500m a year in food advertising and PR budgets to persuade everyone from consumers to politicians that the intensive high-tech approach is the best way to go. But half, even vested interests are now deeply anxious about water stress, oil dependency, climate change. Even mighty companies cannot resolve these problems. It requires rich societies to eat and behave differently.

And we must admit the Ecological Paradigm is not without its own problems, particularly on the social side. As I said earlier, for one thing the actual costs of food tend to go up, largely because a rational food system ‘internalises the externalities’. What you pay for food covers *all* costs, and that *looks* expensive. In contrast the real costs of cheap food turn up *elsewhere* in the form of ill health, environmental impacts and so on, but people are used to buying cheap stuff at the point of sale, so there’s an unresolved issue of social fairness and ability to cope. This is further made complex by being a tension not just within but between societies.

I think we have a big challenge now to shift food culture very fast. The mainstream food system always talks about delivering ‘value-for-money’ but the Ecologically Integrated approach involves delivering ‘valueS-for-

money'. In my view a food system with the right embedded values *does* minimise the overall costs, but because it internalises them it looks superficially more expensive.

Another unresolved policy dilemma concerns land use. Take the issue of foods imported from developing countries. Essential development in a local economy might well be funded by trade in local foods. But do we know what the longer-term effects are? For example each green bean stem requires an estimated 4 litres of water, so imported beans are importing 'embodied water' that in some areas will be a scarce resource. This looks horribly like re-colonising the global South to me. Taking water is taking livelihoods in the name of maintaining them.

Incidentally, in my view water is going to be bigger politics than oil.

PH: You are a well-known critic of the mainstream system, but also a much-sought advisor in government and industry circles. Are they really listening?

TL: Only time will tell. My sort of views have only really begun to get some traction relatively recently. But, to be positive, there is wider recognition even among die-hards that there are problems which cannot be solved in the old ways, and that this is a time for 'all hands to the pump'. Some sustainability thinking is being translated into business models; some more deeply, some cynically, to protect reputations. But I am gently surprised and pleased to see how some of the big industrial players seem particularly attentive. Reviewing retailers' actions for the SDC report 'Green, Healthy & Fair', I was convinced how government needed to be tougher,

more coherent and imaginative, to unlock the current policy lock-in. New Labour rhetoric about joining up is easier said than delivered. For example one part of the government is concerned with conserving endangered fish stocks, while another is promoting a 'two portions of fish a week' message on health grounds, claiming that fish stocks are outside its remit. There is a total failure of coordination across the government, but it's probably fair to say this reflects a certain schizophrenia across the whole of society. We all sort of want to do the right thing but we don't.

PH: Talking of government, was it true the story that you popped a bottle of champagne when MAFF, the old Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food was abolished and reorganised as Defra?

TL: Yes! And I'll tell you why. It's well known in the social sciences that regulatory bodies suffer from 'agency capture', that is, they get gradually taken over by the constituencies they are supposed to regulate. MAFF was set up in 1955 – created by merging the old, excellent consumer and health champion Ministry of Food into the productionist Ministry of Agriculture and Fish. By the 1990s MAFF had been seriously taken over by producer interests, and there was almost nobody left to bat for the consumers. I was working with the London Food Commission in the 1980s, and what we had to confront was awful. The salmonella, BSE, additives scandals meant we weren't popular in Whitehall but won the public arguments. The Food Safety Act, the demise of MAFF, the creation of the Food Standards Agency and then Defra are all legacies of that

long tussle. It was a privilege to be involved in such a classic moment of food democracy versus food control. As a result, Defra today is a much more diverse, public-oriented outfit, and does some good things, although now having lost the energy and climate change bit to Ed Milband's new department, we should keep a sharp eye on it.

PH: Would you say that's part of your job as a government advisor?

TL: Yes. I sit on the Sustainable Development Committee and the Dept of Health's obesity expert advisory group and now the new Council of Food Policy Advisors. In all of them, I try to champion the case for coherence across issues; not trading off environment for health or social justice but trying to get advance across all. The SDC has this 'critical friend' role enshrined, which is why it's such a joy to be on that body. Governments, like us all, might say we like advice but gnashes its teeth at what it receives sometimes! As you know, I strongly believe in the crucial role of government in food policy so obviously I want it to work. At City University's Centre for Food Policy, we teach a perspective that food policy is almost inevitably a battleground between competing interests and social forces. The dangers are that conflict becomes enshrined, or that the powerful crush the weak, or that important issues are marginalised. The point of good governance is to give expression to those competing interests and to facilitate the general good. Government is highly significant in that process; but so is accountability of companies and consumers. It's the approach the SDC summarised in the 'I will if you will' report.

PH: You coined and developed the concept of ‘food miles’ back in the early 90s. In retrospect, what is your view of it as a measure of unsustainability?

TL: It’s woven into the language now, a shorthand for a debate, a perspective. In the early 1990s, it was very helpful to get people to realise that food wasn’t local any more but had become globalised and industrialised, trucked about endlessly—and often needlessly—before reaching the plate. And it’s truer than ever today. About a quarter of freight traffic in the UK is food-related, and half of that is lorries travelling empty, sort of non-Food Miles. To some extent the Food Miles metric isn’t accurate; carbon or greenhouse gas emissions are better measured using Life-Cycle Analysis. But, to return to my concern about shifting food culture, food miles has been really helpful in engaging everyday language and beginning that process of improved understanding. Food miles has become a shorthand for our tragic divorce from local foods; so it’s an incentive for different approaches, a reconnection of production with consumer consciousness. That, surely, is to be welcomed.

PH: But Life-Cycle Analysis is a more comprehensive measure. Is it the best?

TL: LCA applied just to carbon misses a lot of important features we should be concerned with. What about water for example? Or biodiversity? Health? Equity? I have become increasingly unhappy with the principle that we must trade off important values against each other. Ask people what they want from their food, and worldwide they come up with roughly the same list: quality, availability, health, sustainability,

affordability, cultural appropriateness, etc. I think we need to keep sight of that broad vision. It’s what I have semi-pompously called ‘omni-standards’. We want gains on all fronts, not just a trade-off of one feature for losses on others. Back to fish and omega-3s. 6 or 9 billion people cannot all eat 2 portions a week. Fish stocks are already in crisis. The pursuit of good nutrition cannot be at the expense of environmental degradation. We need win-wins, or more accurately, a cycle of improvement on all fronts. So how can we get the right nutrients for health?

PH: Tim Lang throws down yet another gauntlet! Well, to conclude, can we talk a bit about food security? Is it possible we could have genuine food shortages in the UK?

TL: The Government line is that we are rich; we’ll always be able to buy on world markets. I am not sure. That’s a risky position. Today the UK mainly procures from elsewhere in Europe. Overall, we are importing a lot more food. It was less than 20% in the early 80s, and it’s nearly 40% now, and growing.

The food system is so complex, interdependent and finely tuned that it’s vulnerable to at least temporary shut-downs. Remember when the tanker drivers refused to deliver oil in 2000? We were just days away from shortage. A few food magnates told me they worried about riots. Actually the last food riots were in the late 18th century! But they’ve happened in 2006-2008 in many countries when food prices rocketed. We cannot be complacent. Frankly, I don’t foresee a big melt-down tomorrow, but the system is nowhere near as robust as we normally assume.

My concern is to ensure food skills, land health (soil, water, infrastructure) all are fit to produce food as we want and need.

Some sectors *are* actually near meltdown. We only produce 10% of the fruit we consume for example. We cannot grow bananas (not yet, anyway) but why are we importing apples or pears? Orchards should be being planted.

PH: So what is the sustainable and resilient future for food?

TL: There’s no single simple formula. A sustainable diet would not be the same everywhere. In the UK, surely it will involve more appropriate, local production, more fruit and vegetables, more of us growing our own, more space for wildlife, and particularly, less meat and dairy. Through most of human history, meat’s been a treat. It’s become everyday and cheapened, at great loss to animal welfare. Eating meat endlessly and dedicating so much land and cropping to meat and dairy worldwide is an historical aberration. Definitely, sustainable food systems will be less livestock-intensive.

Sustainability is about appropriateness of land use, methods and eating. They’ve got out of line, on that the evidence is clear. We now have little time to get them back in order. The good news is that millions are aware of that. The tricky bit is confronting the ethos of choice. The end of the Age of Unbridled Choice is not exactly a popular political line. But come, it must.