

And so cities stopped caring about food...



Food is rising on the political agenda of many European cities. But, have cities never cared about food? Quite the contrary. History shows that food has been at the core of cities' strategies from the Antique times onwards. Only with the rise of the national state and industrialisation have cities lost their grip on food issues.

A chapter by Benoit Daviron, Colinne Perrin et Christophe-Toussant Soulard in a [recent book on urban food policies](#) allows us to take a step back to understand how what cities are doing today belongs to a wider history. And more specifically, how history can cast a light on the power relationship between cities, states and rural areas .

Ensuring urban food supply: cities at the forefront

Cities in the Antique and Medieval times were actively managing their food systems. Their objective was to prevent famine. Their philosophy was that food supply was far too strategic a topic to be left in the hands of the private sector alone.

This led them to develop a wide array of actions. For instance, some cities specific “public services” to guaranty cereal supply to the urban centres. They also made sure that food supply would not be captured by a single actor (or a cartel), for instance, by fixing a cap to daily food purchases. Some cities in the Mediterranean area even developed a public distribution system parallel to the private one: the annon system. This consisted in buying and redistributing grains at a good price to urban dwellers, and later, in regulating market prices. Price management will remain a key feature of these public interventions.

Cities interventions on their food supply was therefore closely linked to an unbalanced power relationship with rural areas. Indeed, the city's hinterland, i.e. the lands on which it relied, was of significant importance and cities continuously seeked to capture food produced there for themselves. Powerful cities such as Venice or Geneva even went further by imposing that all grain produced locally should be sold to its inhabitants, and to them only. In Geneva, for instance, this covered a perimeter of around 20 km around the city. This also met another of the cities' strategic objective, namely, impeding that activities that would compete with the urban ones could develop in their rural hinterland.

The rise of the nation state and its alliance with rural areas

From the 16th Century onwards, interestingly, as cities are gaining more and more inhabitants, they are, at the same time, losing more and more power over their food system. This is due to the development of the nation state.

When cities were seeking to ensure their food supply, national states have wider objectives. In the 19th Century, the development of the international markets makes exporting goods (food included) key to ensuring a country's power over its counterparts. After the First World War, states' objectives move towards self-sufficiency. All this leads to a renewed interest in rural areas, that need to

produce enough to meet these objectives. States also seek to modernise the agricultural sector to liberate workforce for the industry. On top of that, their alliance with rural areas is also a way to undermine urban protests (especially the workers' movement).

From the 16th Century onwards, Nation States forge a historic alliance with rural areas, that represent food producers, at the expense of cities, that stand for food consumers. Cities still act in the field of food (for instance, by setting up slaughterhouses or municipal laboratories that check food quality). However, they have lost all influence over their food supply.

Cities are back...

History thus teaches us that cities' action on food supply corresponded to a time where they were centres of power, and declined with the rise of states. In this light, how can we explain the current renewal of cities in the field of food policy?

Accord to [Benoit Daviron](#), who coordinated this work, this can be due to several factors:

- First, consumers are willing to take back the power over their food. Educated urban populations want to have their say on the way their food is produced and where it comes from.
- Second, the withdrawal of national states from interventions in the agricultural sector since the 1980's.

However, this situation raises two challenges:

- That of the power relationship between urban and rural areas, and, more specifically, that of the imbalance of power. Whereas cities have historically always organized the dependence of their hinterland, **how can we make sure that such imbalances do not happen again in the future?**
- That of the efficacy of cities' actions. Indeed, in today's urbanized world, cities are everywhere, but they are also, individually, less powerful than their medieval counterparts. They have become acephalous metropolis, and thus more difficult to govern. In this context, **how can we make sure that cities are actually able to handle the food problems they are willing to tackle?**

These are two questions that any city should keep in mind when it is defining its food policy...

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Source

[Daviron, Benoit, Perrin, Colinne, Soulard, Christophe-Toussaint, « Histoire des politiques alimentaires urbaines en Europe, de la ville antique à la ville industrielle », in in. Brand, C. et al, \(2017\), *Construire des politiques alimentaires urbaines. Concepts et démarches*. Editions Quae, Versailles](#)

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