

If food is politics, we need citizens, not consumers

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For a long time, those who deal with the environment, sustainability, and agriculture believed and communicated that changing consumers' daily habits could make a difference. Today, according to Fabio Ciconte, it's time to admit that this has not been the case: consumers' behaviors remain within the sphere of individual interests, whereas what is needed now is to care for the common good through collective action. In one word: politics.

The new book by Fabio Ciconte, *Il cibo è politica* (Food Is Politics), published in May by Einaudi, is a short and intense essay that aims to overturn the way we – those of us who have been working on food issues for decades – have viewed the relationship between food and social dynamics over the last 40 years or so. Ciconte reflects on what has been said and done in past decades by organizations in this sector and asks: have we perhaps oversimplified?

The idea that the power of the consumer – their freedom not to buy products that go against principles of environmental protection, health, or labor dignity – could be enough to change

the market: isn't that a bit too simplistic, too linear, too naive – and above all – too ineffective, given that the big agri-food business is still in the hands of the same entities and the market is far from any profound change? Worse still: isn't that idea aligned with the very concept it was meant to oppose – the omnipotence of the market – the capitalist belief that the market can fix the problems it creates?

These are not idle questions. Nor is it the first time they have been clearly stated in print (see, among many examples, *In difesa dei contadini* by Antonio Onorati, TerraNuova, 2024). However, Ciconte pursues this line of reasoning with particular determination, going so far as to ask: could it be that this “voting with your wallet” idea is just a modest fallback compared to the original idea of changing society? After all, voting with your wallet still affirms the health of a consumer society, one that follows the path of capitalism and addresses only those who have a wallet worth paying attention to.

In a conversation with the author, we explored some of the key points of his work:

Why is food political? And when did it become clear?

Humanity has been shaped and fulfilled through food. If politics is everything that concerns people, then food is politics even more so, because it has always been with us and always will be – especially because food is the result of a series of political choices.

Just look at public funding for agriculture: today the CAP fund is being reduced from 380 to just over 300 billion euros. Deciding how public money is allocated is politics. Or think of financial decisions: some food commodities are traded on the stock market, which means that their price is set by external players, in places unrelated to either fields or kitchens – but tied to banks and economic power. And economic power is politics.

Are we just now realizing this for the first time?

No, of course not. But now it's becoming clear that the path we've followed so far doesn't lead very far in terms of change. For decades, we believed that simply changing demand would change supply. But food demand changed based on economic and political assumptions that were never dismantled. Even the most sensitive, critical, and conscious consumers avoid challenging the basic rules of industrial production, large-scale distribution, and low-price logic. At the same time, the supply of the very food we encouraged people to

avoid grew stronger in terms of presence, persuasiveness, and omnipresence in supermarkets.

So should we abandon the call for conscious consumption because the real task is to dismantle the political and economic foundations of the system? Or is a synthesis possible?

To change the system, we must first understand it. This book tries to restore some complexity to food-related issues. The debate has been made superficial in recent years, and to paraphrase a title by Safran Foer, it's time to admit that no, we can't change the world before dinner. Partly because some people don't even make it to dinner – due to poverty, need, and financial constraints – and partly because the social fabric today is very different from when we believed that consumer behavior could be a lever for change. In the 1990s, there was a large movement we were all part of, and individual action was part of collective action. Today, we are stuck at the individual level.

And maybe that's just one more victory for capitalism.

Exactly. Referring to ourselves as “consumers” detaches us from our social role and tethers us to individual interests. Moreover, the global industrial food system has learned to speak our language, pretending to yield on issues framed as major consumer victories – but which in fact are just formal concessions that change nothing of substance, or even worsen it.

For example?

Palm oil. It only became a significant issue for consumers when framed in terms of individual health. Environmentalists had shouted for decades about the environmental harm – the real issue – with no effect. But once it was labeled a saturated fat, everyone started buying cookies marked “palm oil free.” Yet global palm oil production has continued to rise. Forests are still being cleared for plantations. We buy the new recipe cookies thinking we're doing our part – but we're only protecting our own well-being. And the sum of individual well-being does not equal collective well-being.

You also cite the case of brown sugar.

Another good example. Many people choose brown sugar, believing it's healthier, more natural, less processed. It's not true. The process to make brown sugar is the same as for beet sugar – it's just a little darker. Industrial brown sugar leads to deforestation in Brazil, while white sugar is mostly produced in Europe. There is brown sugar with higher environmental and social quality – fair trade unrefined sugar – but we've all come to believe that choosing the brown packet is enough. Yet the brown sugar we consume in cafés and supermarkets is often refined and far from fair trade standards. Fair trade sugar is excellent, but insufficient to meet consumer demand. Consumers have been led to think that “brown” equals “good,” while the industry moves ahead unchallenged (and white sugar, at least, travels fewer kilometers).

Back to movements. They were supposed to change the system, but instead only did what they could without challenging the consumer society. What happened?

I believe movements lost their momentum from the 1990s and now must find new paths – due to disillusionment with politics, voting, and democracy. Think about it: conscious consumers are increasing, but voter turnout is decreasing. If we're only individuals and not a community, that's the logical outcome.

As civil society, we long thought we could be an alternative to politics – that we could do without it and its institutions. But we were wrong. If we don't understand the weight – the value – of politics in production and consumption choices, if we don't tie food quality to wages and social issues, we won't move forward. We'll keep failing to answer those who say they can't afford to shop consciously.

We must confront how society has changed: stagnant wages, declining purchasing power, people with less money and time. Supermarkets have grown, convincing us they save us both. In big cities, they're a reference point: open late, with ready meals, single servings, convenience items. Even if you know you're working until 9 p.m. just to pay for overpriced food, the cycle traps you. If no one challenges it – including movements – it will keep strengthening, because pre-washed salad is more convenient than conscious consumption.

So we gave the wrong advice?

Not entirely. But we only told part of the story. Encouraging people to spend more makes sense only to a point, and only for some. We didn't give bad advice – but we wrongly believed that one actor (the weakest one) could change the system alone. So the guilt fell on individuals rather than focusing on institutions and collective interests.

Who is your book speaking to – individual readers or organizations?

It's an attempt to reflect on what we've done so far, from the perspective of an organization like Terra!, founded in 2008, striving to be a modern environmentalist group – one that cannot ignore food, and thus politics. People in economic difficulty must be able to access food that is nutritionally, environmentally, and socially sound. Today, organizations working in agriculture must primarily fight for income. The fight for a minimum wage is one of the most important ecological battles. Alexander Langer taught us this long ago, in different words but with the same substance.

Terra! aims to connect environmental and social issues because today exploitative agriculture is more widespread than we think – exploiting land, farmers, and vulnerable consumers. Our mission is not to sugar-coat things. We tell the hard truths: about labor exploitation, supply chains, their distortions. We must stop oversimplifying – stop launching one slogan at a time as if it were the solution, whether it's "buy seasonal" or "eat less meat." Yes, eat less meat – but also change production systems, stop the spread of factory farms, and disincentivize them.

Same for food waste.

Exactly. You can't tackle waste just by reallocating surplus through charity or telling families to make omelets with wilted veggies. That again makes it seem like waste happens at home – and that's where to fix it. Instead, we must reflect on how constant marketing drives overconsumption. And overconsumption begins with overproduction. Farmers are pushed to grow more and more, to perfection – or it becomes loss or waste. The same market that tells farmers to produce more tells consumers to buy more. It's a vicious cycle where only the rich

and powerful win. And it's a cycle we can't escape alone. Politics must protect us.

Back to where we started: food is - must be - politics.

Yes. We must re-learn how to engage in politics. I see it firsthand in the Rome Food Council, which I chair. 150 organizations are navigating a very complex situation. The third sector often thinks it understands representative democracy, but it doesn't. They use "politics" to mean "the bad guys," when they should use it to define their own mission.

In *Foodsystem 5.0* by Alex Giordano, scientific director of this portal, two key elements for change are identified: clear policy goals and the resources/incentives (not just financial) to achieve them. This brings to mind the Green Deal: should we archive it or reform part of it?

It seems we can now speak of the Green Deal in the past tense. It didn't go well. Agriculture was used as a wedge to sink it, and the transition was betrayed. Since the invasion of Ukraine, every move has undermined the Green Deal. The real challenge now is to put the food world at the center and give it a voice, salvaging the intentions of the Green Deal while rewriting much of its structure. Otherwise, we'll keep seeing a manipulated food debate, where food is framed – depending on timing and convenience – either as glamorous Made in Italy or as under attack by lab-grown meat. Instead, food must be framed – and realized – as a basic need and a right, starting with those who struggle just to buy groceries.

Fabio Ciconte

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Fonte: <https://www.ruralhack.org/en/food-is-politics-fabio-ciconte-interview/>