

Governing Hunger

« We are hungry ! ». This vengeful graffiti which appeared on a giant portrait of Abdoulaye Wade, the president of Senegal, in the very middle of the summit of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference in March 2008, was quickly removed. A leitmotiv from Nouakchott to Douala, from Maputo, to Abidjan, it indicates that something is at play that goes beyond the journalistic obsession for the increase in food prices. The price elasticity of families is reaching breaking point. Social and administrative control is pacing. Now that societies have been « deregulated », it is the bodies and minds that have to be « administered ».

This project is, in a number of ways, about a return. A return on certain « words»: self-sufficiency is no longer a Third Worldist idea, since it has become a « humanitarian emergency ». A return on certain « ideas », too: African family agriculture has a future, because it is « multifunctional ». A return, finally, on certain « received wisdom »: the state is no longer a liability, and trade has never been a way to solve food inequalities.

These shifts are the result of a turnabout in the global food system: producers and consumers, small and big, are now all fighting in an arena that is open and finite and offers little prospects for expansion in the short term. Hunger thus instils itself durably in our minds.

Hence the interest there is in rereading classic texts, from *Géopolitique de la faim* (1965), *Sécheresses et famines du Sahel* (1975), *Economie alimentaire* (1990) to *La sécurité alimentaire à l'heure du néo-libéralisme* (1991). After a long period during which hunger was held at bay, reduced to the paradigm of food security, the troubled times we are living through call for a re-examination combining a geographical and political angle¹.

In the course of the past decade, studies of hunger have developed and have not infrequently been the victims of fashionable labels elaborated outside academia such as « food insecurity and vulnerability », de « food poverty », « food sovereignty », « nutrition and food security ». Both political and technical concepts and instruments have evolved, though less thoroughly than is often claimed. And if more agents have been involved and if instruments for both prevision and diagnostic have grown better, the governance of hunger is more than ever an uncertain matter, because the causes and manifestations of hunger are simultaneously multiple, random and recurring, because food supply (through aid and transfers) can occasionally exclude and segregate, but also because popular expressions of hunger are not easily objectivised and normalised.

In many African countries, many households have uncertain and precarious access to food, which contradicts the growth in production which appears in official statistics. Food scarcity

¹ The present proposal follows upon the effort carried out in the dossier « Risque et politisation alimentaire en Afrique » (*Revue Tiers-Monde*, n°184, 2005) and “ Les enjeux de la crise alimentaire mondiale ” (*Hérodote*, n° 131, 2008).

has actually grown banal, and is taken as a given by a number of institutions, while the most vulnerable often refrain from violent protest out of modesty and fatalism.

But how long is this going to last ? The durable increase in the prices of staple foods in both emerging and very poor countries has to be taken into account by the authorities in charge. The trials aggravate tensions and discourses are getting progressively more radical. Food is now brandished as an opposable right. Others describe the strategies of certain multinational corporations as a form of « food terrorism » while African heads of state turn « food sovereignty » into a politically profitable line.

The very notions of « hunger » and « food crisis » can be called into question. What kind of hunger are we talking about ? Measured or experienced ? Quantitative or qualitative ? As for crisis, it is often treated as the result of an external shock (drought, evolution in price, locusts) and treated as a punctual event. It is rarely analysed through the notion of risk, risk-taking and risk-transferring. The word « crisis » itself has lost its meaning from over-use. Nowadays, even when a crisis is heavily mediatised, it is not easy to mobilise donors, particularly when this crisis coincides with other catastrophes. How can one « sell » a phenomenon which is inscribed in the *longue durée* and durably affects bodies and minds ? Under these conditions, how can it be redefined, measured and administered ?

As an unlikely object, a food crisis is better approached from geographical (spatial inequalities), anthropological (social disparities) and political (its uses) perspectives by integrating the variety of its agents, its logics and their struggles (economic, political and symbolic). A food crisis is both a stake and a resource, and it has strategic implications on the building of discourses and claims, on the telling of history and on the competition of histories.

The idea that hunger is « governed » might seem unduly provocative considering the vacuity of food policies in Africa and the persistent incapacity to anticipate and prevent situations of scarcity which are often predictable when they are not chronic. Still, it makes sense in a number of ways. First, more than ever, hunger seems to call for a significant political response and not a purely economic one; African rulers know that and are trying to keep a hand on the granary. Second, the agents involved are many – traders, NGOs, elected representatives, associations, mass media, religious leaders, donors, civil servants. And not infrequently, the same people have been in charge ever since independence, with unchanged behaviour. All of them revolve a same single issue (« hunger »), with precise regulations but changing rules. There are « opportunity effects » and « pack effects » whenever scarcity aggravates. The words chosen to denounce or justify, and the silences themselves, all say a lot.

Exploring the governance of hunger also requires that we look into the politics of hunger – all the compromises which, no matter how unsteady, are legitimate in terms of good governance, the enunciation of all those things left unsaid that are both useful but socially unacceptable. For this reason, it makes sense to study the many productions, the complete set of processes through which norms, instruments and actions, whether joint or specific, are delimited, validated, legitimised or denounced. This implies acknowledging the variety of « intermediary stages » where new political constructions can be elaborated.

Beyond rhetoric, one should first put the emphasis on the political constructions that influence the definition of frameworks of reference in the field of food insecurity. Where does the field of the fight against hunger begin and end ? Who should be aided and supported ? Who does validate, promote and legitimise approaches to reduce food insecurity ?

One should also reflect on the political dimension of the instruments used for the measure and diagnostic of hunger (maps, indicators, samples), which are always far from the scientific neutrality they pretend to: they can often be instrumentalised for purposes of legitimisation or the tapping of aid.

Finally, one has to take into account the theatrical stagings which the management of food crisis affords. By « staging », one means here the set of discourses and postures of the various agents involved in food governance whose aim is the promotion of one's actions and the legitimisation of one's existence (within an ever-evolving context) at least as much as the resolution of foods crises. These stagings relies on a mediatisation of both causes and effects that can occasionally verge on the surrealist or the autistic, as well as on the production of explanatory, justificatory or accusatory discourses. It is now widely accepted by both aid and academic experts that there are countless discrepancies and gaps between the theatrical stagings and the objective facts,:

- a gap between « above » and « below » in terms of knowledge, means, perceptions, images and representations, at several levels (international, national, regional, local) ;
- a hiatus between the growing technicisation of the fight against hunger (bureaucratisation, depolitization and sophistication) which aims at preventing social crises and maintain certain rent-positions and its blatant politization ;
- a contradiction between the discourses on hunger, its lived realities and their representations ;
- a tension between a series of an apparent consensus on trendy concepts, methods and themes and the multiplication of agents involved in food governance with interests that are not infrequently contradictory.

Contributions for this special issue of *Politique africaine* can bear on all the countries of the continent. Texts regarding the governance of food risk and food crisis, on the geopolitics of economic and social tensions and the local conflicts they may generate or fuel in East, Central and Southern Africa or the Maghreb are particularly welcome. Proposals dealing with the social and political stakes of the management of hunger and malnutrition are also welcome, as well as analyses of the contests, open or hidden, between representations of food and hunger.

One-page proposals should be sent to Pierre Janin for the end of May 2009 :

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