The Belly of Paris: Hunger in the face of plenty

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This issue of *Sight and Life* carries on page 159 a review of the report on Nutrition and Food Systems published in September 2017 by the High Level Panel of Experts (HLPE) on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

The Foreword, written by Patrick Caron, Chairperson of the Steering Committee of the HLPE, observes that: “Malnutrition in all its forms ... now affects all countries, whether low-, middle- or high-income. Those different forms of malnutrition can co-exist within the same country or community, and sometimes within the same household or individual, and can even paradoxically be linked: they thus must be fought altogether. As a consequence, hunger and malnutrition will not be “self-corrected” only by economic growth, as many people thought in the past; nor will these concerns be spontaneously addressed. On the contrary, nutrition must be integrated as an explicit objective in national policies, programmes and budgets, not only in low-income but also in high-income countries. Cross-sectoral nutrition strategies should be designed and implemented at different levels, from global to local.”

“The belly of humanity”
Dating from at least the Middle Ages, Les Halles was dramatically modernised in the 1850s. Redesigned by the architect Victor Baltard as a series of massive buildings made of glass and iron, it became a symbol of modernity and of the Second Empire of Napoleon III, which ran from 1852 to 1870. It was literally known as “the belly of Paris.” As Zola wrote in his preliminary notes for the novel, “The general idea is: the belly, the belly of Paris, Les Halles, where food floods in and piles up before flowing out to the various neighbourhoods; – the belly of humanity, and by extension the belly of the bourgeoisie ... People gorging themselves and growing fat is the philosophical and historical side of my novel. The artistic side is the modernity of Les Halles, the gigantic still lifes of the eight pavilions, the avalanches of food to be seen every morning in the center of Paris.”

The main protagonist of *The Belly of Paris* is the young Parisian Florent Quenu, an intellectual who has been mistakenly arrested during a failed coup in 1851 and sentenced to five years’ hard labor on Devil’s Island (*Île du Diable*), the notorious French penal colony of Cayenne in French Guiana, which opened in 1852. Escaping Devil’s Island after a long spell in prison there, he makes his way back to Paris by a lengthy and circuitous route but collapses from hunger and exhaustion just a few miles from the city’s outskirts.

It is at this moment that the novel starts. The front driver of a train of horse-drawn carts carrying vegetables into Les Halles from the market gardens around Paris almost runs over the body of the unconscious Florent by mistake in the dark. She takes pity on him and gives him a lift back to the center of his native town. Ironically, the famished Florent completes the final stage of his journey home on a heap of food that he cannot consume:

“No now he was, lying at ease on a bed of greenery which felt as soft as a feather bed. He raised his head a little to see the luminous haze rising above the dark roofs that could
just be made out on the horizon. He was nearing his goal, he was being carried along towards it, and had nothing to do but abandon himself to the movement of the cart; and this effortless advance left him with only his gnawing hunger to contend with. It gripped him once more, causing him terrible, almost unbearable pain. Now that his limbs had fallen asleep, he could feel only his stomach, racked and twisted as by a red-hot poker. The fresh smells of the vegetables around him, especially the carrots, affected him so much that he almost fainted. He pressed as hard as he could against this deep bed of food in order to tighten his stomach and silence its groans. The nine carts behind him, with their mountains of cabbages and peas, their piles of artichokes, lettuces, celery and leeks, seemed to be rolling over him as if to bury him beneath an avalanche of food. There was a halt, the sound of loud voices. They had reached the barrier and the customs officials were looking into the carts. Then Florent entered Paris on a heap of carrots, his teeth clenched and in a dead faint.”

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Florent is taken straight to Les Halles by the carter, who needs to sell her produce there. His return to his home town – transformed unrecognisably by the ambitious building projects of the Second Empire – is a nightmare experience. The food itself – so varied, so vivid, and arrayed in such prodigious quantities – is beautiful, but overwhelming for a man who is almost starving to death:

“By degrees, as the fires of dawn rose higher and higher at the far end of the Rue Rambuteau, the mass of vegetables grew brighter and brighter, emerging more and more clearly from the bluish shadows on the ground. Lettuces, endives, chicory, open and rich soil still clinging to their roots, exposed their swelling hearts; bunches of spinach, sorrel, and artichokes, piles of peas and beans, mounds of cos lettuces, tied up with straw, sounded every note in the scale of greens, from the lacquered green of the pods to the coarse green of the leaves; a continuous scale of rising and falling notes that died away in the mixed tones of the tufts of celery and the bundles of leeks. But the highest notes, at the very top of the scale, came from the bright carrots and snowy turnips, scattered in tremendous quantities throughout the markets, which they lit up with their medley of colours.”

With immense difficulty, Florent – who has no money for food – steals a carrot that has fallen to the ground, only to find that his stomach can barely digest it. Eventually he has to flee this hallucinatory cornucopia, still famished:

“He had but one thought and desire, which was to get away from Les Halles. He would wait, and later, when the footprints were clear he would look again. The three streets that converged here – the Rue Montmartre, the Rue Montorgueil
and the Rue Turbigo – filled him with uneasiness. They were cluttered with traffic of every kind, and vegetables littered the footpaths. Florent walked straight ahead as far as the Rue Pierre-Lescot, but the cress and potato markets seemed impassable. So he turned into the Rue Rambuteau. But in the Boulevard de Sébastopol he was confronted with such a bottleneck of furniture wagons, handcarts, and traps that he turned back and proceeded along the Rue Saint-Denis. He found himself once more among the vegetables. On either side the stallholders had just set themselves up, their wooden planks placed across tall baskets; and the deluge of cabbages, carrots and turnips began all over again. The markets were overflowing. He tried to fight his way out of the current that had swept him from the line of his escape; he tried the Rue de la Cossonnerie, the Rue Berger, the Square des Innocents, the Rue de la Ferronnerie, and the Rue des Halles. Then he stopped, discouraged, frightened, unable to escape from the infernal merry-go-round of vegetables that seemed to be swirling round him, slowly entwining his legs with their greenery. The endless stream of horses and carts stretched as far as the Rue de Rivoli and the Place de l'Hôtel de Ville; huge wagons were carrying away supplies for all the greengrocers of an entire district; traps, their sides creaking, were setting off for the suburbs. In the Rue du Pont-Neuf he got completely lost. He stumbled upon a mass of handcarts, in which greengrocers were arranging their mobile displays of purchases. Among them he recognized Lacaille, who took off along the Rue Saint-Honoré, pushing a barrow of carrots and cauliflowers. Florent followed him, in the hope that he would guide him out of the mob. The footpath was now quite slippery, although the weather was fine; the litter of artichoke stalks, turnip tops, and leaves of all kinds made walking dangerous. He stumbled at every step. In the Rue Vauvilliers he lost sight of Lacaille. Near the corn market he again found the streets blocked with carts and wagons. This time he made no attempt to struggle; he was once more engulfed by Les Halles, the tide swept him back.”

What Zola does here with vegetables, he does elsewhere in the novel with fruit, meat, charcuterie, fish, and cheese; there is in fact a very famous passage which has come to be known as ‘the Cheese Symphony’ for its exuberant evocation of the pungent splendours of French cheese.

The battle between the Fat and the Thin

The starving Florent Quenu eventually reconnects with his half-brother and sister-in-law, who run a very successful butcher’s shop in Paris. Through their agency, he recovers his health, puts on a little weight, and eventually – going by an assumed name, for he is an escaped convict who has returned illegally to his native country – obtains a job as the fish inspector of the market. The irony is supreme: The socialist-leaning Florent becomes an agent of the establishment, keeping order among the stall-owners who despise him for everything he represents – his sincerity, his work ethic, and, not least, his thinness. For – and this is a major difference between Zola’s day and ours – *The Belly of Paris* chronicles the battle between the ‘Fat’, successful, well-fed bourgeoisie who support Napoleon III and the ‘Thin’, discontented outsiders who cannot belong to this new world of industrially organized plenty. “‘Cain,’ remarks one of the novel’s characters, ‘was a Fat man and Abel a Thin one. Ever since that first murder, the big eaters have sucked the lifeblood out of the small eaters. The strong constantly prey on the weak; each one swallows up his neighbour and gets swallowed up in turn.” Zola was writing long before the dietary transition of our times, which has triggered an epidemic of obesity among sections of society who subsist on a high-energy, low-cost western diet packed with fat, sugar and highly processed carbohydrates.

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The key elements of the food environment that influence the types of food available and accessible, They influence the types of food available and accessible, as well as the way they are produced and consumed.

The food supply chain encompasses all activities that move food from production to consumption, including production, storage, distribution, processing, packaging, retailing and marketing. The decisions made by the many actors at any stage of this chain have implications for other stages. They influence the types of food available and accessible, as well as the way they are produced and consumed.

The food environment refers to the physical, economic, political and socio-cultural context in which consumers engage with the food system to acquire, prepare and consume food. The food environment consists of: “food entry points”, i.e. the physical spaces where food is obtained; the built environment that allows consumers to access these spaces; personal determinants of food choices (including income, education, values, skills, etc.); and the political, social and cultural norms that underlie these interactions. The key elements of the food environment that influence food choices, food acceptability and diets are: physical and economic access to food (proximity and affordability); food promotion, advertising and information; and food quality and safety.

Consumer behavior reflects the choices made by consumers, at household or individual levels, on what food to acquire, store, prepare and eat, and on the allocation of food within the household (including gender repartition, feeding of children). Consumer behavior is influenced by personal preferences determined by taste, convenience, culture and other factors. However, consumer behavior is also shaped by the existing food environment. Collective changes in consumer behavior can open pathways to more sustainable food systems that enhance food security and nutrition (FSN) and health.

Florent eventually gives up his loathed job as a fish inspector and falls in with a set of revolutionaries who are plotting a socialist coup: “The giant markets, overflowing with food, had brought things to a head. They seemed like some satiated beast, embodying Paris itself, grown enormously fat, and silently supporting the Empire … Les Halles were the shopkeepers’ belly, the belly of respectable petit bourgeois people, bursting with contentment and wellbeing, shining in the sun, and declaring that everything was for the best, since respectable people had never before grown so wonderfully fat.”

From hunger to insurrection

Florent is by now a very different man from the innocent schoolmaster who got caught up in the protests of 1851 and was unjustly arrested and deported for suspected complicity. He is now a political visionary, a man who wants to assuage his hunger for justice through violent action. Florent and his fantasists fail in their attempt to overturn the Second Empire, and Florent is arrested and deported once more: his life comes full circle again as he is condemned to return to Devil’s Island, having achieved nothing during his brief and unhappy return to Paris.

Reverting to the CFS’s report on Nutrition and Food Systems, we can see that Zola describes in _The Belly of Paris_ the core elements outlined in the FAO’s conceptual framework: the food system, the food supply chain, the food environment and consumer behavior (see Box). Our current concerns with obesity are not reflected in Zola’s world, which still viewed fat as a sign of wealth and concomitant health; nor is the global world view of the CFS reflected in _The Belly of Paris_, which focuses squarely on the contemporary French society of Zola’s age and, like most of his novels, the society of Paris. But despite the differences between these two pieces of writing, appearing almost 150 years apart from one another, they agree – the first implicitly, the second explicitly – on the right to food:

“Every human being has the right to adequate food. However, the progressive realization of this right will not be achieved without more sustainable food systems that facilitate healthy and sustainable food choices and ensure FSN (food security and nutrition) for all, including vulnerable people with specific nutrient requirements (such as young children, adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women, the elderly and ill people), or marginalized people with less control over their diets (such as the poor, as well as some indigenous peoples).”

_The Belly of Paris_ demonstrates poignantly how a highly organized society can create sophisticated food systems that fail to meet the needs of society as a whole and consequently breed suffering and alienation. Florent and his little group of dreamers fail in their fictional coup attempt in 1873; but Lenin and his Bolsheviks were to succeed spectacularly in Imperial...
Russia just half a century later, in 1917. In a world shaped by ever-sharpening conflicts over the world’s natural resources, Zola’s vision of hunger in the face of plenty still has much to teach us.

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References
02. Ibid. pp 6–7.
03. Ibid. p. 25.
04. Ibid, p. 191. The speaker is the painter Claude Lantier, who was modeled on Zola’s friend Paul Cézanne and also features as the main protagonist in Zola’s 1886 novel L’Oeuvre (The Masterpiece).
05. Ibid., xv.