Editorial: Food security, technology, and the global commons—‘new’ political dilemmas?

While in many places of the world people are starving from hunger, in other regions we are deeply concerned with the quality of our abundant food. The mad cow disease that broke out some years ago in the UK was a reason for many people to stop eating beef or meat altogether—especially after several dreadful documentaries of patients with the Creutzfeldt-Jakob syndrome, the human variety of the mad cow disease. The number of vegetarians in Europe rose dramatically. If people continued eating beef, they made sure that it came from ‘safe regions’ and not from the UK. However, ‘risk’ and ‘safety’ are relative concepts and soon also in the Netherlands and Germany mad cows were found, showing the trickiness of defining ‘safe regions’. In addition, it was only a matter of time before loads of forbidden meat from the UK were found in shops throughout Europe rechanneled through mainland factories. This makes clear that consumers can be as strict as possible in their food rules and choice of products, but that this becomes pointless if they cannot ‘trust’ the information on contents and background of the products.

An interesting phenomenon about ‘food scandals’—similar to political scandals—is the short time they stay in people’s minds. It did not take long before the new vegetarians in Europe returned to eating meat and the ones who had turned to pork, happily went back to their steak even if from a UK cow. While most Europeans had abandoned the nightmare images of the Creutzfeldt-Jakob syndrome, American colleagues visiting Europe were not so sure yet and shamefully avoided ‘our’ European cow meat. This also shows how food dangers are mapped in

different ways in different parts of the world. It reminds me of travelling through Latin America where people have their own knowledge about safe and unsafe food and explained to me in which regions I should avoid certain vegetables or meat because of the use of too many chemicals or the risk of dangerous parasites. Although the validity of these statements is difficult to judge, it always seemed wise to follow the local food rules.

This relates food issues to questions of knowledge, risk, and politics. For example, one of the consequences of different food scandals, such as the mad cow disease, has been that the products in the shops now provide extensive information about their contents. Elaborate international systems of tracking and registration of ingredients and food products have been established, which not only inform the buyer on the product but also on its origin and its production and process methods. More information seems to imply ‘more security’. But does information indeed increase security or, for that matter, feelings of security? Are we more confident with respect to our food intake? What is the value of this information for the consumer? Do we trust it? What is in fact the type of information consumers are looking for? Many interesting questions which form the research topics today of studies in the anthropology of food and risk.

All these questions also play a role in a discussion, which at a first glance might seem of a more ‘technological’ and ‘scientific’ nature than that of a cow that cannot stand on her feet, namely that about genetically modified organisms, GMOs. The articles in the special section

by Birgit Müller show that heated discussions take place around GMOs. People who are in favor of using GMOs and further developing the technology argue that GM is the solution to world hunger: through genetic modification, it will be possible to create crops that produce higher yields, are more disease resistant, and are able to grow in harsher environments. Thus it would be the answer to starvation death in Africa. On the other hand, opponents of GMOs point out that world hunger is not a problem of food production but of distribution: globally there is already enough food, what is lacking is the political will to redistribute it and prevent people from starving. GMOs are moreover condemned because of the unforeseen consequences they may have such as the possibility that new plants and animals emerge that have dangerous effects for human health and become uncontrollable.

There is also concern that there might be adverse health effects to people and animals who consume GMOs, which have not yet been discovered. Here we see processes similar to those around the mad cow disease. For example, what type of information do consumers need and want in order to evaluate the risks involved in consuming GMO food? How is safety defined and established? In addition, similarly to the mad cow disease, consumers can be very determined about their decision with respect to the eating of GMO food, but do they really have a choice? Several studies have shown that Americans have been eating genetically modified corn since the mid-1990's without even knowing it. Genetically modified crops represent half of all corn acreage and 70 percent of all soybean acreage in the US. So, to what extent will consumers have a choice in the future?

Although there are similarities between food problems such as the mad cow disease and GMO food, there are also fundamental differences. Because GMOs demand a high degree of expertise and expensive technology this field is controlled by only a few corporations in the world, which have acquired a dangerously powerful position. For example, it is common to find a pharmaceutical corporation that seeks to acquire rights to the human genome, also owning the lab-

oratories that do the genetic testing, the patents that emerge from the testing, and the generated medical products. New types of property including bio-informatics, information on genetic codes, have been included in national legislations. Genetic modifications are immediately patented by the corporations who created them in order to keep the monopoly over their inventions. This means that a very influential technology that will affect many areas of our life in the future, including the food we consume and the medicines we take, lies in the hands of only a few multinationals with an increasing monopoly on life-controlling information.

The phenomenon of securing property rights on genetic codes has been analyzed by several authors as the privatization of the global commons. Privatization here stands for the right to exclude others from the use or benefit of basic human resources. Yet, to what extent can we allow that genetic information, clean air and water, a healthy environment, which in the past were considered to be common property from which nobody should be excluded, become private property? In recent decades precisely the 'right not to be excluded' from access has gained importance in environmental movements all over the globe. As articles in the special section show, the fight against GMOs and the privatization of the global commons may be characterized as a truly global social movement. Activists from different countries work together and in their struggle talk about humankind in general and refer to international environmental laws and regulations.

The discussion on the privatization of the commons obviously has a long trajectory in anthropology although the types of commons that are addressed are different. In her article about the transformation of property systems in England, the US, and Russia, Kingston-Mann beautifully shows how in different historical periods and in different parts of the world privatization and enclosure of common lands, meant the transfer of common properties 'from the many to the few'. Her article also describes how these transitions were always accompanied by new laws supporting the privatization processes. The central

role of legal struggles and court cases around GMOs also becomes clear in the articles by Müller and Pagis in the GMO section. The privatization of what in the past was considered a public common good is supported by extensive new legislation brought into being under pressure of the big companies. Denissen's article on the search for justice of family members of police victims in Argentina reminds us however that also in other than anti-GMO struggles, laws, legal procedures and court cases today play a prominent role. This seems to coincide with a more generally documented trend, namely that the law and court cases are acquiring an increasingly important role in political and social struggles around the world.

So although some years ago GMOs might not have been seen as an obvious field for anthropological study, it is clear why studies on GMOs are an area of growing anthropological interest and concern. In Reyna's contribution to this *Focaal*'s Forum we encounter another less obvious topic of socio-political anthropology and one

that complements the politicization and cultural embedding of technical/biological objects like GMOs by doing something more or less the opposite: connecting culture to the neurohermeneutic systems in the brain. Reyna shows that neurohermeneutics can be a useful tool for anthropology as it facilitates biological collaboration with social and cultural analyses. The incorporation of neurohermeneutics would allow anthropologists through a string being ontology to arrive at more elaborate accounts of the human condition.

Together with Keenan's alarming article on the political fabrication of 'terrorism' in the Sahara by the US and Algeria, the articles in this issue of *Focaal* all contribute to the thought-provoking and novel views sustaining anthropology as an exciting disciplinary field that challenges political situations through new and sometimes unexpected forms of theorizing.

—Monique Nuijten