

WN Editorial

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Living and being in this world

The boiling point

These are elemental times. Streets and cities are on fire. The air swirls with hurricanes. Earth – soil, and the planet – is contaminated. At the poles, ice transforms into water. This element has special qualities. Its boiling point is sudden, as all who make a pan of stew or a pot of coffee know. The water held in a vessel over a flame becomes warm, then hot, but otherwise does not change. Then suddenly it bubbles and boils.

With world food systems, and the political and economic ideology that replaces food cultures based on meals with supplies of snack products, bubbles are surfacing. The unexpected catalyst is the work of the French economist Thomas Piketty. Scroll down to know why now. Meanwhile, Bill Clinton, on the cover of this issue of *WN* [and featured inside](#), has also suddenly turned up the heat.

This man's ask

'Take this man's details' Bill Clinton said to his aide, at the scintillating EAT Forum on agriculture, food, nutrition and the environment, held on 26-27 May in Stockholm, and [described by Bruce Cogill](#) in this issue of *WN*. Bill Clinton had just given the EAT keynote presentation. 'This man', Tim Lang, professor of food policy at City University in London, together with other EAT presenters, had 30 seconds with the most persuasive US president of our times, for a handshake and the chance of an 'ask'.

Tim Lang asked one precise thing. This is that the Clinton Foundation, and Bill Clinton personally, should recognise, support and boost sustainable dietary guidelines. A couple of days later [Olivier de Schutter](#), also an EAT speaker, gave his valedictory address after six years as UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food. After travelling the world, talking to those that know, and seeing for himself, he said that he sees 'a transition from below, towards more sustainable food systems':

As illustrated by the new Brazilian *Food Guide* – which, spearheaded by Carlos Monteiro, is far more lucid and promising than the traditional dietary guidelines taught in schools – we are paying greater attention... to how and when we eat, and we are recognising that food is also about culture, pleasure, and conviviality.

Tim Lang and Olivier de Schutter were both in effect referring to another EAT presentation, [accessible here](#), on the new official national Brazilian *Food Guide*, now being revised after public consultation. Carlos Monteiro was speaking as convenor of *The Food System* project, centred at the University of São Paulo (whose investigators include WTN editorial team members). What the new *Guide* stands for in terms of real sustainability, is indicated in WTN this month [in the first of our Farming series](#), for which Enrique Jacoby and colleagues from the UN system in the Americas are responsible. This concludes:

The need to make better use of food systems and supplies to improve nutrition and health is now well understood. More than that though, perception has now shifted toward promoting healthy, sustainable, biodiverse and culturally appropriate diets, always with respect for the environment.

One crucial insight was repeated at EAT. Like guides to food, meals and cultures that are good for people, populations and also the planet, sustainable food systems are not new. While making full use of beneficial modern technology, they recognise and valorise the wisdom of the ages. This is encapsulated in simple sayings such as ‘put back what you take out’ or, as farmers ask of ramblers, ‘Please shut the gate as you leave’. Everything is replenished, little is wasted, everybody is careful.

With food systems and supplies, dietary patterns, and population nutrition, bubbles are surfacing because of the catalytic effect of people who are mostly new on the scene. One is Bill Clinton, whose condemnation of sugar, and his personal reasons for this, are summarised in [our commentary on the movie Fed Up](#). The short period of less than 200 years in which nutrition has been seen principally as the study of nutrients, is ending. Instead, there is now a concerted return to the principles of dietetics, in which eating well is an integral part of life in a family and society. All those engaged in public health as well as nutrition are naturally part of this shift.

The rebirth of convivence

Sustainable dietary guidelines and food systems are an aspect of a much greater theme. Set out as a paper for publication in a journal, some of its key words might be names, with Bill Clinton, [Pope Francis](#) and Thomas Piketty as three. Others could be [Jim Yong Kim](#), [José Mujica](#) and perhaps [Alexis Tsipras](#) and [David Harvey](#); and closer to home, [Gunhild Stordalen](#) and [Richard Horton](#).

The theme can be deduced from such names as these. It is convivence, a rare word now that will become common. It means ways of living and being in which we humans achieve solidarity with one another, and harmony with the living and physical world and the biosphere. Nothing less will do. Any system of world governance in which politicians and officials, plutocrats, and other power-holders, set rules, make laws, and behave in ways that the rest of us are meant to follow, imitate, envy, or live with, will continue to lead to the end of the world, at least in the form that we now

know it. Thus, if 'development' means more overuse and abuse of human, living and natural resources, as it now does, 'sustainable development' is a contradiction in terms.

The basic ideas of convivence, as of sustainability, are originally ancient. They have been expressed by Chinese, Indian, Greek, Roman, Mayan and Arab thinkers who guided the organisation of their societies. Their wisdom included observations on dietetics, the science of the good life well led. This includes the golden rule, 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you'; or else Johann Wolfgang Goethe's saying 'we owe to others what we are', in which 'others' includes the non-human world.

From quantity to quality

This though, requires rejection of the delusion that enhanced value – including progress and development – is measured by more and more money. The false ideology of quantity has to be replaced by a true philosophy of quality, of what really makes for good lives and healthy societies. Thus the Brazilian dietary guidelines are centred on freshly prepared meals enjoyed in company, rather than on nutrients as may be found in 'fortified' snack products. This is not an adjustment of nutrient-based thinking. It is a different concept. Folic acid is measured in the body, in micrograms and serum. Conviviality is expressed from the mind, heart and soul, with laughter and poems.

Historians in future may agree that if one person above all is identified as the paradigm shifter or point tipper, this is the French economist Thomas Piketty. Of his book *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Nobel Prizewinner US economist [Paul Krugman](#) says

It's a work that melds grand historical sweep – when was the last time you heard an economist invoke Jane Austen and Balzac? - with painstaking data analysis... Underlying his discussion is a tour de force of economic modeling, an approach that integrates the analysis of economic growth with that of the distribution of income and wealth.

The point here is not just one of verve. It is what Thomas Piketty proves. It is this. The grotesque inequities of wealth, that rightly now alienate and enrage hundreds of millions of people, have been excused by the claim that the super-rich enrich the rest of us too, that more money means more benefit for all. *Capital* proves that this is not true. Actually, wealth measured as money reliably comes not from earnings but from capital. That is to say, to quote one commentator, 'the meritocracy of capitalism is a big fat lie'. Almost all people who earn a living, even in high-income countries, are being robbed, just as surely as in the first era of *laissez-faire* capitalism.

Once Thomas Piketty's thesis is accepted and understood by all who have always been uneasy about the way of the world now, current casino capitalism should collapse. This need not take too long. Then, and only then, equitable, convivial societies, and sustainable food systems, can grow from ever-fertile soil.

The editors