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House of cards. Fragility and resilience of food systems in a pandemic

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House of cards. Fragility and resilience of food systems in a pandemic

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7 *On the 4th of November 2020, my almost two years old son woke up from his afternoon nap with a bit*
8 *of a fever. What would usually be an unremarkable occurrence for a toddler, this time made us worry*
9 *about how to get food for our family for the next couple of days.*

10
11 *D's preschool class was put into quarantine only a few of days before, after a member of staff had*
12 *received a positive test for COVID-19. His dad and I had been alternating childcare duties and work,*
13 *and today was my turn to look after our son. D's dad was at work, and had planned to pick up*
14 *groceries on the way home, to replenish our almost empty fridge and pantry. But now, with D.*
15 *developing COVID-like symptoms, we were all advised to self-isolate immediately, and until we could*
16 *book a test and receive negative results. A positive test for even just one of us three would have*
17 *meant self-isolation for the whole family for two more weeks.*

18
19 *As I waited for my partner to get back from work, I started thinking about the missed grocery*
20 *shopping. We could likely scramble enough together for the evening, but it was definitely time to*
21 *schedule a delivery from a local grocery store. However, all of the main supermarkets offering*
22 *delivery services to the area where we live did not have any available spot for at least 10 days. As it*
23 *often happens, frustration led to procrastination, which in turn led to social media, which led me to a*
24 *chat with the owner of a local bakery, who was "of course!" happy to drop off some bread at the end*
25 *of the day. Energised by the discovery, I called a local food cooperative, which, for a small fee,*
26 *arranged the delivery of a large box of fruit and vegetables for the following day.*

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33 In the context of the global pandemic of 2020 (and 2021) the episode above is certainly mundane –
34 an experience that many can probably relate to. But it is in moments like this that we are reminded
35 of the glitches in the sleek and efficient futures that we designed yesterday, and
36 that pervade today's interactions with many goods and services.
37

38
39 Yesterday, we thought of online supermarkets as *the* future, but it was smaller shops that today
40 showed resilience, effectiveness, and adaptability. Yet, the lure of techno-driven innovation leads
41 us to trust virtual portals and mobile application for the efficiency and safety that their sleek
42 design communicate, over traditional mom-and-pop shops, even if these are only a phone call
43 away. But when disruptions happen, we are reminded of the complex and very
44 material logistics and geographies that these marketplaces rely upon (Beckers et al., 2018; Murphy,
45 2007).
46

47 In the early months of the pandemic, China was the Country who first had to deal with massive
48 disruptions to its food supply chain. These were mostly a result of strict lockdown
49 measures impacting mobility of produce and the availability of labour. In addition, the sudden shut
50 down of all hospitality businesses meant that farmers had to deal with unsold produce, some of
51 which risked being left unpicked in the fields. As the traditional food systems collapsed, large e-
52 commerce enterprises provided farmers with alternative channels for direct sales to consumers, by
53 giving them spaces for live-streaming and helping them set up online stores (Hao, 2020). Reflecting
54 on lessons learnt from China's quick response to the pandemic, Fei and Ni (2020) cite multi-
55 stakeholder collaboration, diversity of distribution channels, and local food production and networks
56 among the key factors to ensure resilience and sustainability.
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1 Food looks deceptively simple by the time it gets to our kitchen, but whether it comes from a small
2 shop, a large supermarket, an online marketplace, or a direct producer, it is always part of a larger,
3 complex system. This is true not only when it comes to processed food, but also for raw fruit,
4 vegetables, and animal produce. And because all of us need constant access to food in order to
5 survive, we are bound to be dealing with such complexities every day. Further, as food is the
6 only thing that we own which, through ingestion, literally becomes part of who we are,
7 our relationship with such complexities is an intimate one (Lupton, 1996). When the stories of the
8 food we eat are made visible, they can challenge our values and make us question
9 otherwise trivial choices.

11 Historical trajectories and the legacy of decisions taken in the past are tangible in today's food
12 systems, particularly when it comes to infrastructure and values (Clune & Pollastri, 2020). The design
13 of food infrastructures can impact our ability to hold up to our values and cultural beliefs when it
14 comes to food, while societal values and beliefs often shape the decision-making processes that are
15 involved in the design of food infrastructures.

18 In "Edible Speculations", Dolejšová invites us to explore the possibility of Tarot reading
19 as a playful way of crafting and discussing participatory visions of food futures. When used as a tool
20 for world building, cards could become a starting point to explore and discuss complex
21 systems, shuffle their elements, and create prototypes and critiques through these combinations. As
22 a fictional world, the deck of card contains innumerable possibilities, some of which are
23 potentially dissonant or conflicting. In a year that showed us the importance of resilience, diversity,
24 and connectedness when it comes to food system, I read Dolejšová's paper as an invitation
25 to understand and engage with the deep implications of food futures in the making. An invitation to
26 critique, collaborate, discuss, and most importantly, listen.

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