Food

Morning everyone, it’s a pleasure to be here and to thank Peter, Godfrey and the other organisers of this event for your energy and creativity in making it happen.

I’m going to speak about the food section of the original book, edited by Barbara Kern and me, and about its resonance in the modern world, then our distinguished panel will say their bit, and then we’ll have discussion.

Let me start by introducing us all. I am a self-employed communicator working in science and higher education, and was a member for many years of the Undercurrents collective. With me today we have:

It is important to realise that the remit given to Barbara and me for the food section of the book was not to predict the future 40 years out. I have worked with futures types a lot, and they would never try anything so impossible. In any case, our aim was to build a better world, not forecast one.

But on digging out my copy of Radical Technology, I got a few good surprises. The first was that the basic shape of the book and the sections in which it is organised, reflecting fundamental human needs such as shelter, community, materials and indeed food, has held up well.

Turning to the food section, I’d divide it into three zones that perhaps reflect the book’s ethos more widely. I’d call them the political, the practical and the mystical.

I think I’d still defend the slightly pompous introduction to the section, which seems to have my and Barbara’s names on it. It stressed a few points: that producing food outside the market system can mean more nutritious eating; that it is economically viable; and that it can prefigure other and bigger challenges that people and movements can pose to big business and the state. I believe that the values that this statement implies remain valid, even if we now live in an era where the state is a rather less terrifying ogre than we felt it was then, and where corporate power has grown as state capacity has been eroded.

The section proper begins with a number-dense analysis of the evils of agribusiness by Charlie [Clutterbuck] here, and this definitely comes under the political heading. Here you proved all ends up that contemporary agribusiness was dramatically unproductive, used massive inputs of chemicals, oil and other fell substances, ravaged the environment, and led to farmers as well as consumers being enslaved by the mighty forces of global capital. All true, probably more today than it was then, although I doubt in 2016 that you would use the term “primitive” about the traditional farming regimes of New Guinea. It’s a fascinating piece partly because it accepts that agribusiness cannot be abolished overnight. Charlie calls instead for diversification into new economic and ecological approaches.

This piece is followed in the book by two examples of the “practical” category. The first is an aggressive defence of meat farming, by John Seymour of self-sufficiency fame, then a substantial figure on the UK media stage. In it he makes the claim that farming without animals is doomed. The big grain and vegetable farming areas of England and the US exist only because of fertilisers used to subsidise land fertility, he says, before having a go at vegans for their habit of begging manure from proper farmers. Don’t forget that this all was written in an era when vegetarianism was widely regarded as little better than a fad.

His piece is notable for the nitty-gritty detail it contains of how you go about rearing animals to eat. It would be fascinating to know whether anyone actually tried it on the basis of what he wrote. Later on, he also delivers a valuable chapter on fridge-free food preservation, again filled with all sorts of practical advice. The same very detailed approach is taken by Lawrence Hills of the Soil Association in his contribution to do with compost. He recommends nicotine as an ideal insect repellent. Boil up your own cigarette ends, he says, or get them from the local cinema if you don’t smoke.

Also intensely practical are the chapters on fish farming and hydroponics, both with masses of detail on setting up and running productive systems. I realised on rereading it that Hydroponics might not be quite as macrobiotic a process as you may imagine. Ground-up bones seem to figure quite a bit.

Also useful to this day is John Shore’s chapter on food values and nutrition, which I found well worth re-reading.

Indeed by modern standards, the book is very didactic and full of usable, valuable information. It is not afraid to pile on practical or otherwise useful information, or to throw in tables and diagrams. It belongs to an era when dumbing-down was not a thing, and for me that’s all to the good.

More deeply embedded in mystical territory is the chapter calling for organic farming on Steinerian principles of anthroposophy. I’m amazed that Word did not underline that term when I typed it, but in fact the chapter is really a call for organic farming that takes account of the needs and characteristics of the plants involved. 40 years on, it now looks almost mainstream. The same cannot be said for the chapter on Zen Macrobiotics – brought to the West, it says here, by “George Oshawa, a little Japanese fellow.” We even spelt his name wrong, it was actually Ohsawa. This hasn’t aged so well and I frankly doubt that many people today regard potatoes as poisonous, as is claimed here.

Finally, two pieces in the section really do look forward to current concerns. One is on water farming, which contains all sorts of helpful advice, even though its advocacy of divining as a practical means of water prospecting may put it partly into the mystical camp. The other is on the need to reassert the importance of trees and forests, as food sources, and as ecological assets in their own right, for example in water control and for reducing land erosion.

So I think we did a fair job, on balance. After all, the Undercurrents collective of that time was a rather urban setup and was not well-informed about food except at the most romantic of levels. Barbara and I made no claims to be experts on the matter, although I have learned a little bit since. We had ideas about what people ought to eat, but knew far less about the tricky matter of actually growing it. Charlie was one exception, and another was farmboy and prominent collective member Chris Squire, then with added Hutton. Chris was tactful about our efforts, but he made it clear that he regarded the idea of self-sufficiency in food, promoted by the then sainted John Seymour, as idiotic and selfish. He expressed on the quiet his strong opinion that a farmer who can only manage to feed their own family is in the wrong business.

As I keep saying, we were never asked to predict the world of 2016 when we planned the book. So it is no disgrace to admit that we never saw a lot of things coming that we now regard as important. As far as I can see, there’s no mention of climate change in the food section, although it is now regarded as the big issue affecting world food production, and despite the fact that the idea was 80 years old in 1976 and was discussed at some Undercurrents meetings.

In the same way, we never grasped the universal and transformative importance of the IT revolution, for agriculture as for everything else. In 1976, Moore’s law was 11 years old, so maybe we could have done better here too. And it’s not just computers that have transformed approaches to food. For example, precision agriculture can reduce inputs of water and other essentials for food production, while the clever use of tools like GIS can, at least in principle, allow small farmers to close the productivity gap with the big players. At the time we’d probably have regarded GPS as some plot by the military-industrial complex rather than as a free good we should exploit.

Allied to this point, and for me one of the most striking features of the section, is the way in which almost all the contributors envisaged people doing positively pre-industrial amounts of sweated labour to feed themselves, and that they’d choose this as an attractive lifestyle option, in the teeth of millennia of evidence to the contrary. If we did it now, there would be far more of a Machine in the Garden approach, emphasising soft, renewable high technology, green robotics if you like, instead of all that digging.

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More to the point, I think, is the fact that the section is highly oriented towards the production of food. It largely fails to take on food as something that people sell to other people, who then eat it, or to examine alternative approaches to doing this. FairTrade does not get a mention, which it certainly would if we were writing this book now, and nor do animal rights. And we’d have more on healthy diets, maybe even some recipes.

Linked to this is the section’s biggest failing as a vision of the future, its emphasis on scarcity. Radical Technology was published in an era when mass starvation was seen as a genuine prospect for the human race, partly because of the work of Paul Ehrlich. At that time, half the world’s population was living in poverty as defined by the World Bank. Now it’s under 10 per cent – still too many, but still. As we know, when people get richer, or less poor, their first reaction is to tuck in. In 2016, obesity is more of a problem than underweight all over the rich and the developing worlds, except in places that have suffered complete political collapse. Indeed, 1976 is now regarded by statisticians as Year Zero of the UK obesity epidemic.

As this example shows, the book’s biggest message for 2016 is in the social, not the technological, sphere. Thinking of food, it remains true that most of the food eaten in the world gets to the consumer by some sort of market mechanism. That has probably got more true in the past 40 years as traditional societies around the world come under the influence of the market. We called in the book for substantial land reform, to put more land into the hands of small producers, trading locally if at all. 40 years later, plenty of people like to eat local food and it’s highly available. But at the same time, the mega food retailers have built up a level of dominance that we could never have anticipated in 1976.

However, there are also some good trends that we can claim to have anticipated and encouraged. A lot of fish is now farmed in this country, and a lot of vegetables are produced hydroponically (as are plenty of illicit drugs). When we write about them, these were both pretty cranky ideas.

Indeed, many of the suggestions we were making then retain their value today. You’ve probably seen estimates that one species, homo sapiens, is using anything up to 40 per cent of the biological productivity of the Earth’s land surface and maybe 30 per cent of its marine productivity. I find figures such as these hard to accept, but respectable people seem to like trotting them out, a bit like Earth Overshoot Day (aka August 8 this year). True or not, they make the point that even in a world where the human population is stabilising, we may well need gentler ways of feeding ourselves, especially when indefinite carbon emissions are not regarded as harmless in a way they were 40 years ago.

In addition, I think we were among the first to realise that the piecemeal approach to land conservation then in vogue was not adequate, and that a more holistic look at these issues was essential. Now the “landscape” approach to rural conservation is in all sorts of official documents.

Interestingly too, the water chapter – on small-scale approaches to water capture and supply – pointed to these methods as the alternative to mega water projects, up to and including Soviet plans of that era to engineer away the Arctic. Geoengineering is now back in fashion as a possible cure for climate change. For me, these concepts still have a lot to prove as approaches to the future of the planet, and our smaller-scale way of looking at the issues – one piece of sky for each piece of land, like we said – remains the right one.

So one way and another, I think that the things we had to say have held up not too badly. This may be the result of Barbara’s and my genius, and that of the contributors and the collective at large. But part of the reason, too, is that food is one of the most constant of human needs. Maybe the basic facts and issues about food, farming, growing and nutrition are slower to change than those for the other fields the book touches on such as communications.

Onwards to:

Charlie Clutterbuck

Martin Stott,

Romy Fraser

Erik Millstone