

# Conference on Agroecology for Sustainable Food Systems in Europe: A Transformative Agenda

## Thoughts for food

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I am very happy to welcome you here at the University of Brussels in the name of your two hosts - "Penser la science" and the Laboratoire de Lutte biologique et Ecologie spatiale.

Penser la science is not a research group, it was created in order to organise or promote debates and exchanges aiming at the production of an active culture of sciences in the plural, that is, with their divergences and convergences, their contrasting concerns, their sometimes difficult relations.

In the landscape of contemporary scientific practices we feel that agroecology occupies a very special position. But you all know that and it would be ridiculous for me to elaborate on that.

What I would rather insist on is that thinking food in all its relations, from the soil and farmer's practices to the socio-economy of its distribution does not only amount to a production of knowledge of crucial importance today.

It is also exploring the very possibility of new ways of conceiving the role of scientific research for problems of collective interest, something which we will urgently need tomorrow when facing the consequences of the kind of development which our scientific institutions have blessed in the name of progress and rationality.

As we know fast, cumulative, scientific research has been made possible by the disembedding of problems, their reinvention in the closed, well-controlled environment of the laboratory, and the kind of innovation this has made possible is marked by this strategy.

It demands a top down reorganization of practices, defining as anecdotic what the lab purified away, that is local, practical knowledge of people now defined as ignorant, having to learn what rational progress demands.

Experimental fast research ignores the messiness of the world, but this messiness is now coming back on us under the form of general unsustainability.

The scientific institution should not be allowed to forget about its responsibility in the matter arguing that scientific knowledge is neutral. Favouring fast science as the very model of knowledge production it has also defined in terms of irrational resistances, which would lead us back to the cave, those who objected, demanded that attention be paid to the consequences, promoted the idea that future progress would take care of the negative consequences.

Today, as we know, with the so-called knowledge economy, the fast research model is not only locked in as researchers have been made directly dependent on the interests of its individual partners, but as we know it is deeply poisoned. Frauds, conflicts of interests and speedy, glimmering claims proliferate while questions that would endanger the principle of partnership are avoided or carefully whitewashed.

The proliferation of superweeds in GMOs fields, as well of resistant insects, cannot be denied but it is safely downplayed, mostly presented as controllable, in principle at least...

It will not be allowed to disturb the promotion of monoculture answering the imperative of competitiveness.

Even scientific journals are mobilized. Gilles-Eric Séralini will probably no longer publish in Food and Chemical Toxicology, as an ex-Monsanto employee has been appointed as associate managing editor, a new post created especially for him.

You know all that, and you know that the struggle for agroecology will be a hard one in the present-day ecology of knowledge production. It is the very example of what I would call a slow science, a science which cannot be fast because it must learn and respect the specificity of every local situation, also because it needs that specialists learn to connect, work together as well as with non scientists.

But I also think of it as an exemplary case, the very case where the claimed apolitical nature of scientific research may be publically challenged, where the consequences of the present-day management of scientific research may be demonstrated. But also the very case where the need for a slow research may here be connected with urgent matters of concern and mobilize unexpected new allies.

We desperately need a public intelligence of sciences, of the working of scientific production and its consequences. And when I speak of a "public" intelligence I emphatically include researchers themselves who, working under fast imperatives, are usually devoid of imagination about the practical plurality of sciences and the way lock-in situations are shaping their own future as inhabitant of this earth.

To develop and sustain this imagination is the very aim of the "Penser la science". This is why I very deeply hope that just as one of the great achievement of the resistance against GMOs has been the new and vivid interest of many people not only for the food they themselves eat but also for the future of agriculture itself, one of the great achievement of agroecology will be to provoke a new and vivid interest of our colleagues not only for the research money they themselves obtain but also for the role, present and future, of sciences in our societies.

Please, while thinking of food, provide them also food for thought and imagination.

I wish you a very fruitful encounter

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