

# València — Sustainable Food World Capital. A Social Sciences Vision

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## ABSTRACT

The declaration of València as the World Sustainable Food Capital in 2017, based on the market-gardening system of l'Horta — an area girding the city, has put key subjects such as sustainable production and healthy eating on the public agenda. The process leading up to the declaration (which is in part a heritage-based project) has been fraught with contradictions and conflicts stemming from the city's political, economic and identity dimensions. Examining this process from a Social Sciences angle is of value not only in drawing lessons but also for spawning debating forums in which solutions can be proposed.

**Keywords:** nutrition, sustainability, heritage, identity, València.

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## VALENCIA AND ITS KEY FEATURES

The drive to ensure a food system that meets sustainability criteria reflects a position similar to that concerning The Welfare State. Poor nutrition is increasingly being seen as a public threat. This concern (together with the growth of ecological and other movements) have spawned a great deal of

information on such issues, fostering public awareness of the threats posed by Climate Change and the need for society to farm and consume foodstuffs in socially responsible ways. While this is a world-wide phenomenon, it mainly affects The West — especially in urban areas — and is leading to major shifts in eating habits by certain sectors of society.

The food sustainability paradigm has mainly been applied to production systems based on small to medium-scale local distribution and marketing channels. These operate at a much smaller scale than the mass-production, global trade systems found in most of the foodstuffs industry.

Much of this driving force springs from society, which shapes information sites, and forges networks and new consumption habits (López García, 2011). Yet institutions also play a role, fostering initiatives ranging from the global level to the local one. One such initiative is the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact (2015), better known as The Milan Pact. It is the first international food protocol to be carried out at the municipal level with the involvement of the FAO, to assume and implement the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda, The Paris Agreement and the UN's Food Security Commitments of 2016. In this sense, The Milan Pact forms part of the corpus of Western hegemonic values and intentions, laying the foundations for action in this decade:

Work to develop sustainable, inclusive, resilient, safe and diversified food systems, to ensure healthy and accessible food for all in a framework of action based on rights, in order to reduce food waste and preserve biodiversity and, at the same time, mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change (Milan Pact, 2015).

The declaration of Valencia as the World Capital of Sustainable Food in 2017 must within the framework of this institutional initiative, through which the city would not only become the venue for The Annual Meeting and Summit of Mayor's for The Milan Pact but would seek to lead efforts to put the Pact into practice.

The choice of Valencia stemmed from the unique nature of the city's long-established market-gardening area, which partly reflected the new 'sustainability' paradigm. Valencia's traditional horticulture formed part of the historic model of irrigated areas ringing cities around the Mediterranean basin (López García *et al.*, 2021: 37). Yet the traditional market-gardening

found around the city had been despised for decades and seen as hindering Valencia's modernisation and progress. The Milan Pact stressed: seasonal, 'kilometre zero' agricultural produce; efficient use of water and other resources; short distribution and marketing channels; small-scale commercial networks; a cuisine based on seasonal rhythms; rational consumption. These strands all served to highlight the many merits of Valencia's *Horta* (Rodrigo *et al.*, 2016).

That said, we should not lose sight of the fact the initiatives are of an institutional nature and based upon a top-down view of part of Valencia's heritage that has re-packaged the *Horta* in 'sustainability' terms. One can thus say that it is largely a question of 'old wine in new bottles'. What was lacking was institutional legitimacy, now driven by international recognition, and the consequent process of social (re)appropriation.

However, beyond the Valencia Council's commitment to sustainable food production, the designation of the city as the 'World Capital' in this field must be seen as part of a two-pronged global login. One of these prongs reflect the weight of the so-called "economy of intangibles", or "Capitalism without capital" (Haskel and Westlake, 2017), which has put intangible assets at the forefront of neo-Liberal dynamics. In Valencia's case, the policy of holding major events has been one of the main expressions of this trend (Santamarina and Moncusí, 2013). This policy led the city to host The America Cup in 2007, Formula 1 between 2008 and 2012, The European Capital of Sport in 2011, and The City of Running in 2014. A forthcoming event is The World Capital of Design (2022). The second prong is the 'heritagising' fever defining Western societies within the framework of globalisation and advanced modernity (Prats, 1997; Frigolé, 2014). Indeed, this heritage boom cannot be divorced from the requirements of the neo-Liberal economy exploits heritage as pretext for driving yet more consumption (Heinich, 2009; MacDonald, 2013; Moncusí, 2013; Del Marble and Santamarine, 2019). This fruitful interrelationship between heritage, 'authenticity' and the market explains heritage mania now touches the most mundane of everyday practices, including food.

## HERITAGISING FOOD AND SUSTAINABILITY

Treating food as ‘heritage’ in much the same way as say a work of art or a building is something new. It reveals the way the concept of heritage underwent a sea change in the late 20th Century.

The 1980s saw a new era of modernisation, accompanied by a crisis of identity stemming from incipient globalisation. It was under these conditions that the concept of heritage became more flexible, taking account of hitherto little-explored variables such as ‘immateriality’ and the diversity of agents (Hernández *et al.*, 2005; Smith and Akawa, 2009). In 2003 UNESCO enacted the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. For the first time, intangible cultural expressions are officially recognised as part of world heritage. However, it was not until 2010 that food was put ‘on the menu’ with the listing of French Gastronomy, Traditional Mexican Cuisine, and The Mediterranean Diet.

UNESCO presents The Mediterranean Diet together with its associated food production/consumption patterns and socio-cultural practices as well worth following (Medina, 2017a). As Sandro Dernini, Secretary-General of the International Foundation for the Mediterranean Diet (IFMeD) and an expert from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), points out:

The Mediterranean diet is part of our lifestyle and identity, enshrining the diversity and vitality of our culture. The diet has constantly developed throughout our history (...) giving the Mediterranean people a sense of identity and continuity (Dernini, 2008: 288).

The FAO, — the leading international institution in its field — sees sustainable food in broad terms, covering such things as: (1) nutritional value; (2) economics (food that is accessible, economically fair, and can be easily produced); (3) ecology (low environmental impact); (4) eco-friendly and that can feed future generations; (5) socio-culturally sound (governance paradigm, common goods, and respecting agricultural and culinary traditions).

The effects of the heritagisation of food and the practices surrounding it have been felt both by both locals and visitors. In this case, residents have seen their cuisine ‘commercially repackaged’ and given new angles, while tourists have been offered ‘local products’ as part of the holiday experience. The underlying driving force is the same in both cases:

Tourists and, in general, consumers today are more aware of what they consume and how this ties in with the local environment. This has boosted demand for the consumption of local products (...). To this one can add the ethical discourse and sustainable values based on the region, landscape, local culture, local products and authenticity as fundamental elements of gastronomic tourism (...), driving greater demand for this type of tourism (Leal London 2015, through Medina, 2017b: 110).

On the 26th of May 2015 Spain passed its Act for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage [*Ley 10/2015*], Under the Act, cuisine is considered one of the heritage elements meriting protection and promotion. The same can be seen in the Valencian Government’s Tourism, Leisure, and Hospitality Act [*Ley 15/2018*]. Article 24 of that Act recognises cuisine as a key tourist resource, stating:

For the purposes of this Act, the following are all considered to be tourism resources of prime importance: large festivals declared to be of tourist interest; beaches; congress centres and trade fairs; national and international sporting and music events; the region’s cuisine; agricultural and industrial landscapes, their uses and the ethnological values they enshrine; spas and spa waters; items declared by UNESCO as ‘Heritage of Mankind’ and of cultural interest; nature and conservancy areas (Chapter 2, Article 24).

The City of Valencia is positioned within this ‘Mediterranean Diet’ heritage framework, drawing on the city’s rich culinary tradition and its world fame as the home of the *paella* [a rice and seafood/meat dish]. While it is true that cuisine (especially rice-based dishes) has been a key element on which

Valencia's international food image has been based, it is interesting that the *Horta* (the city's market-gardening ring) was the main reason for the city being chosen as the World Capital of Sustainable Food. Thus, the Declaration of Valencia (2017) stresses the need to foster sustainable production linking "social protection systems to small family producers, boost access to healthy, sustainable diets, reduce food waste, and prepare for climate change".

The city's candidature prospered and Valencia became the global focus of sustainable food in 2017.

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### VALENCIA, WORLD CAPITAL OF SUSTAINABLE FOOD

In 2017, a wide range of activities took place in the city, combining the official 'Food Capital' programme with initiatives already under way: conferences and round tables on agro-ecology, gastronomic fairs, local eco-markets, publications, information, and so forth. As a policy forming part of the first and second *Nau*<sup>1</sup> government, there was agreement between the Valencian administrations (municipal, provincial and regional tiers, in collaboration with The State), Valencian public universities, the media, and civil society (the last including leading entities defending the *Horta* area, such as *Per l'Horta* and the Centre for Rural Studies and International Agriculture (CERAI). These parties all pulled together to build a network and prepare the groundwork for the later joint declaration of Valencia as World Capital.

The Valencian Language Academy nicely captured the spirit of the venture in *Amb molt de gust* (2017), a publication made for the occasion [the Catalan title is a play on words, meaning both "With pleasure" and — more literally — "With a great deal of taste"]:

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1 Translator's note: So called because the coalition partners negotiated the political accords at the *Nau*, the former site of the University of Valencia campus and now a complex of municipal facilities.

Sustainable food is seen as an inter-disciplinary concept embracing many fields and strands, such as: Health; Education; Agriculture; Individual and Collective Rights; Regional Planning; Commerce; Social Inclusiveness; Transport; Energy; The Environment; Sustainable Use of Natural Resources; the survival of local produce against a background of urban growth; Social and Economic Equity. In this sense, Valencia seeks to lead best management practices when it comes to: (a) fostering healthy food; (b) ensuring sustainable use of natural resources; (c) squaring urban growth with a thriving market for local produce; (d) fostering social and economic equity. All in all, the push for fairer, more ecological, rational food policies in urban areas drives change and enhances citizens' lives (AVL, 2017:5).

The institutional and media finishing touch to this scene-setting was the summit of Milan Pact signatories in October 2017. The event was attended by over three hundred mayors, associations, public administrations, companies, and universities supporting the Valencia Declaration (Milan Pact meeting, 2017).

Throughout the process, Valencia dug into its past and regional roots to come up with a story to fit The Milan Pact narrative. This was accompanied by demands that stressed some features at the expense of others, skating over or 'censuring' anything at odds with the storyline. The declaration of the city as the World Capital of Sustainable Food ties in with heritagisation, which in this case was applied to the traditional market-gardening system, and to the resulting landscape and local food and socio-cultural practices. As in any heritagisation process (Sánchez Carretero, 2012), the Declaration spawned its own paradoxes, contradictions and conflicts.

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### FRICTIONS AND PARADOXES OF THE WORLD CAPITAL OF SUSTAINABLE FOOD

One can identify two stages in the development of the 'Food Capital' angle driving heritagisation in Valencia.

The first stage spanned from 2016 to 2018, focusing on the Declaration and the implementation of the first steps. It covered a wealth of initiatives, with a spate of meetings, institutional summits, and stakeholder gatherings dealing with food management tools and processes. The media component also played a key role, highlighting strong commitment to the event.

At first glance, it might seem that the initiative was linked to the holding of ‘mega-events’ – a policy characterising Valencia’s ‘pork-barrel’ politics and sleaze in the early 21st Century. Yet delving deeper and taking a broader time frame reveals a second stage starting in 2019, with two milestones in the consolidation of Valencia’s position as the Capital of Food Sustainability. The first milestone was the setting up of FAO’s World Center for Sustainable Urban Food in Valencia (CEMAS) in 2019. The initiative is part of the trend in recent years to strengthen cities’ role (and weakening that of Nation-States) in shaping Mankind’s future (Sassen, 2015). The UN’s Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), is leading a shift towards municipal governance of food and organic production policies. This is apparent in the CEMAS Mission Statement as stated on its website:

The World Centre for Sustainable Urban Food is a joint initiative between Valencia City Council and the FAO, and its purpose is to identify, classify, disseminate and raise awareness of the major challenges facing cities in properly feeding their populations.

The second milestone was the restoration of the *Horta* Metropolitan Council [*Consell Metropolità de l’Horta*]<sup>2</sup> in 2019. Although the Council currently wants to play a key role as a supra-municipal entity in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, it could also lead a transition to sustainable food and farming in metropolitan areas. Here, the institutionalisation of metropolitan initiatives is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for managing Valencia’s market-

gardening area as a single productive eco-system and thereby overcoming local administrative boundaries.

The Valencia Declaration has been accompanied by a lot of media ballyhoo and showmanship. Yet the Declaration has also served as an institutional and social watershed, driving policies fostering more sustainable production and consumption. However, the international agenda set for the Capital of Sustainable Food sits uneasily with the area’s present approach to food production, creating friction. This is something that deserves critical analysis.

From the outset the storyline for Valencia was not spun around food itself despite the nature of the FAO declaration. Instead, it stressed the production system. Although food and production are intertwined, in the Valencian case the focus was on the productive aspects of market-gardening regardless of whether the output is ecologically based. Here, sustainable food and food practices were seen as necessary but secondary considerations. This contradiction reveals the first of Capitalism’s paradoxes, which directly bear on public awareness policies and the principles of sustainable food.

The World Capital Declaration has launched a spate of initiatives to foster local consumption and vegetable-growing. From the institutional standpoint, there are several municipal strategies for putting The Milan Pact’s principles into action (Valencia City Council, 2017). These involve setting up a whole network of entities and initiatives for shaping the first part of the process as well as the narrative on Valencia as the Capital of Food Sustainability. At its core lies the setting up of the Valencia City Council’s Board for Agriculture, Sustainable Food, and Market-Gardening under the aegis of The Department for Agriculture, Market-Gardening, and Villages. Its aim is to raise the institutional profile of matters bearing on the sector. That said, the corporation’s web site admits that the Board only has limited resources at its disposal. The Board’s main role is to support ‘sustainable food’ initiatives arising from civil society, academia and the private sector. Other bodies and

2 To grasp the political conflict in the *Horta* Metropolitan Council, see Martín Cubas and Montiel (2011) and Farinós et al. (2018).

initiatives pulling in the same direction include: the long-standing Municipal Agriculture Council (CAM); ‘Flights to Valencia’; the Local Observatory on Food Sustainability (OLSA) (2017), and the Municipal Food Council (CMA) (2017). Here one should note the CMA was set up through public consultation to decide how the Council should be governed. Valencia’s Food Strategy 2025 (2018) also emerged from the same consultation process. One of the fruits of the alliance with civil society was the Horta Citizen Observatory (OCH) (2017). This was founded and is run by the *Per l’Horta* group, an association defending the importance of the market-gardening areas since 2001<sup>3</sup>. It was also in 2017 that the Valencia City Council joined the Ecological Agriculture Network of Cities, which brings together local entities, technical staff, and associations.

More direct initiatives have been taken in addition to purely institutional ones. For example, a big boost has been given to the city’s traditional *Tira de Comptar* — basically a huge farmers’ market — whose roots go back to the 12th Century when Valencia was under Arab sway. The initiative was undertaken in collaboration with *Mercavalència* [Valencia Produce Market]. Valencia’s townfolk thus have access to prime, fresh local produce at keen prices and can cut out the middlemen. Over the last few years, the City Council has done a great deal to promote the *Tira de Comptar*, driving its modernisation and highlighting its role through innovation projects such as *Las Naves 2020*<sup>4</sup>. An identifying label (APHORTA) was created for produce from Valencia’s market-gardening area to win over consumers<sup>5</sup>.

One might also mention events such as *De l’Horta*

*a la Plaça* [From The Market Garden to The Town Square] and *Bonic/a Fest* <sup>6</sup>[festival programme at municipal markets].

Without detracting from the positive impact of these events, it is worth asking whether such festivals merely titillate consumers with short-lived ‘fun and leisure’ offerings but fail to change their ingrained shopping habits. Here, the City Council shows little interest in public awareness campaigns to educate consumers and drive real change when it comes to food. There have been some efforts in this direction but they have been timid ones. Here, one can mention the ‘Sustainability on a Plate’ pilot project, trialled at three municipal schools by CERAI, a leading Valencian agro-ecology entity. The project ran from 2016 to 2017 and sought to “draw up a sustainable food strategy for school canteens”. The outcome was a guide for use by such canteens (CERAI, 2021). Yet at the broader level, little has been done to educate the general public with a view to re-shaping consumers’ eating habits.

Meanwhile, a small portion of the citizenry has either found or created its own forums for fostering learning and group awareness on the subject through associations, consumer groups, urban gardens, organic shops, and travelling markets (López García, 2011). Here, there is a confluence of ideas on sustainability, ecology, and climate change, and growing interest in responsible consumption, healthy lifestyles and quality of city life (Farinós *et al.*, 2018). Such ideas had already begun to take root among the city’s middle classes (whether financially or culturally defined), providing fertile ground for the declaration of Valencia as the world’s Sustainable Food Capital.

That said, one should also note that the commitment to eco/organic produce may also clash with the

3 One should note that the web sites of some of these bodies and projects had not been brought up to date when this paper was written. We therefore have no way of knowing whether they have continued their activities.

4 ECOTIRA. Pilot Project for setting up an ecological purchasing centre at *Mercavalència* [Valencia’s wholesale produce market], led by CERAI.

5 There is a lack of data on the selling and impact of products with this eco-label.

6 These events have been held annually since 2016 and have drawn large numbers, except in 2020 when the festival was cancelled because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

farming practices used in Valencia's market-gardening areas. Although the area has points in common with traditional farming approaches (focusing on local, seasonal produce), it is often hard to square with intensive farming catering to a generalist market. It seems that the approach focusing on ecological produce for self-consumption stems more from the labour and productivity crisis affecting Valencia's *Horta* than a quest for ecological sustainability. As some authors have noted, shifting from industrial farming systems to more eco-friendly ones and to organic produce is anything but easy. (López García *et al.*, 2021: 3). In any event, the idea of turning the area into an ecological zone should be the stuff of future debates.

This economic dimension highlights the difficulties faced by the *Horta* market-gardening area, namely: a small-scale production system<sup>7</sup>; an elderly population; scant modernisation; little in the way of R&D and innovation (Farinós *et al.*, 2018; *Pactem Nord*, 2018); failure to adapt to global markets and Capitalist practices. That said, public administrations and business are trying to make up lost ground, take generational replacement into account, and boost both the quality and reputation of the *Horta de València* brand<sup>8</sup>. Right now, there is a drive to modernise the *Horta's* farming methods, and its distribution and marketing channels. The shift towards sustainability has begun with farmers in the *Horta* area (López García *et al.*, 2021).

Against this background, one might ask what is driving Valencia's new-found status as the Capital of sustainable food. The answer may well be a shift away from a general market-gardening system and towards an ecological system combining protection and 'consumption' of the *Horta's* heritage, stressing

the area's special features. The 2019 FAO declaration of the area's centuries-old irrigation channels as part of Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS) should be seen in this light.

However the underlying issue is whether Valencia's status as World Food Sustainability Capital is really shaping a change in the food paradigm or is just a way of protecting the area. Here, one should note that there was a change in policy on the *Horta* following the 2015 municipal and regional elections. From then on, the institutions made a much greater commitment to conserving the area, with the Regional Plan for Valencia's Market-Gardening Area (2018). This change was marked by greater institutional commitment to conservation of the *Horta*, culminating in the Market-Garden Regional Plan (2018), the Market-Garden Development Plan (2019), and above all the Market-Garden Act (2018). These initiatives took a strongly protectionist approach and were accompanied by a spate of sectoral public policies covering economic, labour, cultural, and farming spheres. The policies have been accompanied by studies on the present state of the *Horta* and proposals for remedial action. Many of these initiatives helped lay the foundations to the declaration of Valencia as the World Capital of Sustainable Food. Yet several events over the last few years since Valencia won 'Capital' status reveal a political paradox that is one of the starkest and deepest contradictions found in the heritagisation process.

For Valencia, 2019 proved to be a frenetic year, marked as it was by: the widening of the V-21 highway; the passing of the *Aloraia* General Plan (PGE); the resurrection of the *Benimaclet Est* Integrated Action Programme (PAI); the debate on extending the northern section of the Port of Valencia; continued vacillation on the ZAL scheme [logistics park] in Southern Valencia. All in all, the welter of schemes and proposals fostered a kind of socio-political schizophrenia. The raging political debate revealed that much of the 'empowerment' and 'conservation' discourse was just so much hot air.

7 According to data from the Valencia Council Statistics Office, roughly 1.2% of the population of the City of Valencia work in agriculture, livestock farming, hunting, forestry, or fishing (Ajuntament de València, 2020).

8 At present there is only one Origin Label (D.O.) for produce from Valencia's *Horta* and that covers Valencian Chufa Nuts [*Xufa de València*]

Without going into current administrative bickering and power-grabs, the bottom line is that Valencia's *Horta* has led to fierce resistance, with each of the regional and municipal political parties drawing its own battle lines. The reason for such stiff resistance is that the future of market-gardening in Valencia is not a given, notwithstanding myriad planning regulations, Valencia's status as 'World Capital of Sustainable Food', or even government by parties traditionally defending such activities. It is little wonder that citizen campaigns to protect the market-gardening have sprung up under the *Salvem* banner ['Save It']. The same slogan was used back in the 1990s when property speculation changed the face of the city (Sorribes, 2001; Gómez Ferri, 2005; Cucó, 2009; Vizcaíno, 2012). Those earlier battles gave way to heritage-based discourses to defuse the conflict.

The most recent case of public activism sparked by this conflict is the battle to save the *Forn de Barraca* building in the *Alboraia* market-garden (Olmos, 2020). The old farm building, dating from 1906, was later pressed into use as a bakery. Its demolition as part of the V-21 Highway widening scheme poignantly symbolises the conservationists' defeat by those bent on 'progress'. During the 1990s property boom, the hegemonic discourse was one of untrammelled economic and urban growth to lay the foundations for a utopian future. Fast forwarding to today, the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis has cruelly revealed the fatal flaws of a city model based on major events, property speculation, and political graft. Despite greater awareness of the market-garden's importance from identity, environmental and food perspectives, the *Forn de Barraca* was levelled by the bulldozers. The building's disappearance shows the growing threat to an increasingly fractured market-gardening area despite all the lofty-sounding principles trumpeted during the proclamation of Valencia as the world's food Capital.

In addition, *Alboraia's* General Plan (PGE) (2019) sparked public protest by those seeking to save the market gardening area. Defence associations, such as *Alboraia*, *Horta i Litoral* and *Per l'Horta* heightened

perceptions of a plot to build on the *Horta Nord* area. Likewise, the resurrection of the Benimaclet Plan, which would involve bulldozing traditional orchards and allotments (Boix *et al.*, 2019), has set many associations and neighbourhoods on the warpath. The debate on the northern extension of The Port of Valencia still rages unabated and the fate of the scheme remains unclear. The dangers posed by global warming, the need to protect the area's heritage, and the quest for a sustainable model for tomorrow's cities are further strands in this new stage of public activism.

Finally, protests over plans for a Logistics Park [ZAL] in *Horta Sud* continue to simmer (Lafita, 2020). The plan began in the late 1990s, leading to the expropriation of the houses and farmland of over 200 families in the south of the market-gardening area. The plan was tackled in a halting, piecemeal fashion and has yet to be completed. The idea was broadly to cement over the area and turn it into a logistics zone serving the Port of Valencia. From the *Salvem la Punta* [late 90s campaign to conserve the *La Punta* market garden] to the current conflict over the ZAL, the area has been the worst affected by major infrastructure projects, and in particular from the works for diverting the course of the *Turía* river (Florin and Herrero, 2018; Vizcaíno *et al.*, 2017). This tide of new development was only partially stemmed through the Herculean efforts of local folk and farmers.

While these wounds still fester, Valencia is wrapped up in its status as World Capital of Sustainable Food and is bent on persuading the outside world that it is wholly committed to preserving the *Horta* even though the facts suggest otherwise. The process surrounding the designation of Valencia's 'Food Capital' status has been fraught with contradictions. In this context, heritagisation has eased tensions and highlighted the market-gardening area's many benefits, whether in terms of production, consumption, or landscape conservation. Yet in using the *Horta* to highlight Valencia's 'Food Capital' role, it seems that the heritagisation angle has paid more attention to building identity than to conserving the farming



system itself. The discourse projects a whole set of almost mythical ideas on the *Horta*, appealing directly to many of Valencia's most dearly-held symbols of identity. The 'Food Capital' promotional video (Valencia City Council, 2017), the main PR weapon in Valencia's candidature, epitomises this media approach. Music and an over-the-top, almost 'epic' narrative are interspersed with loving images of a heritagised triad of the Valencian landscape: sea, the *Albufera* [a coastal wetland bordered by rice paddies], and the *Horta* [market-gardening area], with the last given pride of place. The landscape and labouring in the fields are idealised, hiding conflict and offering a sugary vision that dovetails with the heritage discourse. In this sacralisation, the *Horta* and its produce are presented as treasures to be conserved for generations as yet unborn, and the peasants as "humble but proud" workers of this latter-day miracle. Markets are passed off as wondrous "offerings" [in an almost quasi-religious sense]. The video thus pulls all the emotional strings and exploits every stereotype in the book.

The symbolic universe depicted in the video enshrines part of the City of Valencia's collective imaginary. Landscape is a key element in the construction of regionally-based identities. In Valencia's case, since the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century there has been broad consensus on what these 'identifying' landscape elements are, namely: the *Horta*; the *Albufera* wetland; the coastal rice paddies.

Over the last few decades, other parts of the city have also been promoted as symbolic areas — largely driven by new interests (especially property speculation), and new policies (mega-events and cultural buildings) driven by the onslaught of Neo-Liberalism (Santamarina and Del Mármol, 2017). These new drivers focus on the historic centre, overlooking the traditional landscape at best, and subjugating and destroying it at worst. Yet the market-gardening area lingers on in the popular imaginary albeit in a very sketchy way. This is the rub because at the social and institutional level, the *Horta* is treated as little more than a stage upon which to prance and

pose. The area is little known by city-dwellers and visitors alike, and is threatened by powerful property development and other business interests.

In short, heritagisation played a key role in the declaration of Valencia as the World Capital of Sustainable Food, and whose effects are still being felt today. As is so often the case, heritagisation cuts both ways. On the one hand, it appeals to common spaces, mobilises the public and fosters a sense of belonging. On the other hand, it hides reality and the paradoxes, frictions and conflicts that are inherent in any process of heritagisation. In Valencia's case, these problems stem from market-gardening methods and the threats facing the *Horta*.

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## CONCLUSIONS

The declaration of Valencia as the World Capital of Sustainable Food has highlighted many of the paradoxes underlying the city's politics, economics, and identity. These paradoxes need to be seen against the background of long-lasting forces at work in Valencia.

This situation is compounded by two global contradictions that shed further light on the 'Food Capital' venture. First, the 'Food Capital' project has been approached in an administrative, non-ecosystemic fashion, focusing wholly on the city. This perspective means that the *Horta* is again being dealt with in a fragmentary fashion, with all of the limitations that implies. Second, the value set upon the local market-gardening area is determined from global premises — something that is all too common, adding insult to injury after decades of ignoring or even denying the cultural value of the *Horta* ecosystem.

This *top-down* process tends to blur the *Horta's* problems regarding its denizens lives, farming practices, consumption and distribution patterns, property speculation/rezoning, and environmental degradation.

That said, there is still a ray of hope for the *Horta* given that public administrations may still do the right thing and meet social demands. The popularisation of sport and the building of sports facilities is an encouraging precedent in this regard. On these scores, Valencia has recognised the growing public interest in sports activities and in design and has acted accordingly, fostering thriving businesses in both spheres. Enlightened policies on Valencia's *Horta* might also be successful.

From our committed but critical position on these matters, we believe that the Social Sciences should

not only shed light on the issues at stake but also reveal the extent to which public policy discourses and practices measure up to the problems. The heritagisation process stemming from the declaration of Valencia as 'the World Capital of Sustainable Food' reflects an ideological discourse on the need to restore and enhance Valencia's market-gardening area while taking into account the current global dynamics of food and environmental stewardship. Yet in our view, this requires deep reflection on just what Valencia's *Horta* represents and why we want it. It is a debate on which the Social Sciences have much to contribute.

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