

## ***Introduction***

The latter part of the twentieth century witnessed unprecedented changes in the lifestyle of Mediterranean populations. These upheavals affected eating habits in particular, with both favourable and adverse effects on human health, which are now widely recognised. All too frequently, however, we only perceive some of the factors characterising these recent changes such as fast food, GMOs or mad cow disease, the core issues in the current debates of the socially aware. Yet it is only when the situation is viewed comprehensively and in its historical context that the magnitude of this evolution can be realised and the urgent need for action to correct the deviations in our eating habits can be appreciated. A historical analysis of food patterns of this nature, conducted from both the quantitative and the qualitative point of view, is necessary in order to control future developments with a view to ensuring better food security for the populations concerned.

Five major periods can be identified in the history of human food (Popkin, 2002, in Scalbert, 2003):

- **The age of food gathering**  
Primitive man was a hunter-gatherer. Analysis of the eating patterns of populations which are still hunter-gatherers today has underlined both the significance of animal products with a protein content (19-35% of the energy consumed) much higher than the content observed in the Mediterranean zone (10-15%) and the diversity of the food consumed.
- **The age of famines**  
The emergence of agriculture was accompanied with an initial phase of population growth, which a hunting and gathering economy would not have allowed. This period was marked by the consumption of a large proportion of plant products and the selection of a limited number of plant species for food. In many societies living from this traditional form of agriculture it resulted in frequent nutritional deficiencies and periods of food shortage and famine. Many third world countries today are still concerned by these risks of deficiency disease and famine.
- **The age of famine decline**  
The Industrial Revolution brought a considerable increase in agricultural productivity and the development of food processing industries. The food consumed in all industrialised countries became more diversified in the course of the 20th century and there was a significant increase in the consumption of animal products (meat, eggs and dairy products 2003).

- The age of degenerative diseases  
Although these changes contributed to the elimination of the major deficiency diseases, they also contributed to the development of obesity and generative diseases such as cancer and cardiovascular disease, which are known as civilisation diseases (or “Western diseases”).
- The age of behavioural change  
Citizen-consumers are becoming aware of these recent developments in our diet and their effects on health and are beginning to change their eating habits.

How do the various Mediterranean countries stand? Are their eating patterns still close to the “ideal” healthy and balanced diet conveyed by scientists and the media? What are the consequences of these developments for the food security of the populations and for their state of health? Is food insecurity the result of eating habits? We shall endeavour in this chapter to present arguments and elements for debate in reply to these questions.