

## **Cultural Studies and Food Sovereignty**

### **Afterword**

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The discourse on food in the First World or Global North is generally split in two. A binary of panic versus pleasure asks: is food safe for the children, will it make for an enjoyable holiday or evening out, and how can one survive the dross and share the joy of purchasing, preparing and disposing of it?

That binarism often reduces food's material and symbolic existence. It has always been crucial to social structure because of land ownership, state subsidy and the division of agricultural labor, and central to religion because of superstition's nexus between seasons and spirits. The three types of citizenship map onto it: the political (food policy), the economic (food resources) and the cultural (food symbolism). While food is often produced in rural settings, it is increasingly an urban question—literally a moving feast, travelling great distances, accreting and attenuating power and meaning via cultural contact and bound up with survival, as recognised in the concept of food sovereignty's commitment to local production and global nutrition.<sup>1</sup>

In this afterword, I focus on issues that arose for me as I read the excellent essays collected for us by Isabelle de Solier and Jean Duruz. My aim is to suggest further lines of inquiry that relate to these articles.

Isabelle de Solier focuses on foodies, happy *gourmets* and *gourmands* catered to by a *bourgeois* press that prefers connoisseurship to spoiling the meal with investigative journalism about labour conditions, the impact on the water supply of carnivore humans (they use up to three times the amount the rest of us do) or the treatment of animals. The next move after understanding foodie culture is adding a political-economic-environmental dimension to its discourse.

As always in such cases, coming across as a scold can be counter-productive. The challenge is to engage pleasure and panic in equal measure, recalling the importance of fun in food while pointing to the implications for those in other places whose abjection is a counter-testimony to cosmopolitan enjoyment. de Solier's work helps us think about that possibility.

Sian Supski's mixture of personal recollection, genealogy and cookbook reading emphasises the centrality of gender, a theme never far from the culture of food and suffused with indexical inequality. Causal links have been made in Britain and the United States between the number of women in the primary labour market and the prevalence of convenience food in homes, and the US President's Council of Economic Advisors reports that sex and violence can be reduced, and education enhanced, if children sup in the company of their parents. Women are increasingly held responsible for children's health—the gruesomely named 'McDonald's Balanced, Active Lifestyles Team' repeatedly implores 'moms' to be its partners in youth welfare. In California, public-health billboards implore women to stop their children watching TV and start eating fruit.<sup>2</sup> The sense of food as a maternal responsibility is powerful, even as men remain dominant figures among *auteur* chefs, celebrities luxuriating in the grandeur of their menus and management styles as if they were British or Australian university administrators. But we can think of more important links, such as civil-disobedience hunger strikes by incarcerated feminists in the early twentieth century, or the Great Food Debate started a century later by the National Federation of Women's Institutes.

Tammi Jonas's essay completes a series of articles about living in-between, as a migrant: Jean Duruz writing about Africa in Australia, Ben Highmore's textual

analysis of a novel about Pakistanis in the United Kingdom, with a useful backdrop of empirical demographic data, and Tamara Kohn's experience of Thanksgiving from afar.

These essays set me thinking about Néstor García Canclini's notions of hybrid identity and interculturalism and Bruno Latour's reconceptualisation of hybridity.<sup>3</sup> They offer a way beyond hegemonic doctrines of multiculturalism.

Canclini notes three paradoxes. First, globalisation also deglobalises, because its dynamic and impact are not only about transport and exchange, but also about disconnectedness and exclusion. Second, minority communities no longer primarily exist within countries—they emerge at transnational levels, because of massive migration by people who share languages and continue to communicate, work, and consume through them. Third, distinct demographic groups within sovereign-states may not form new and local cultural identities if they largely consume imports from their cultures of origin dispatched by élites in private ways.

Latour and his followers treat cars, missiles, trains, enzymes, and research articles alike as both raw and cooked creatures. His analysis of contemporary life allocates equal and overlapping significance to natural phenomena, social forces, and textual production. Just as objects of scientific knowledge come to us in hybrid forms that are coevally affected by society and culture, so the latter two domains are themselves affected by the natural world. As Latour notes, 'every type of politics has been defined by its relation to nature, whose every feature, property, and function depends on the polemical will to limit, reform, establish, short-circuit, or enlighten public life.' From plutocracy to patriarchy, appeals to channel or protect nature, to govern it, are crucial to political hegemony.<sup>4</sup>

The culture of food is not just a series of texts to be read, coefficients of political and economic power to be exposed or industrial objects to be analysed. Rather, food is all these things: a hybrid monster, coevally subject to rhetoric, status, and technology—to meaning, power, and science.<sup>5</sup>

So understanding food cultures requires studying them up, down and sideways; that is, borrowing Laura Nader's renowned call for a critical ethnography of the powerful as well as the oppressed and George Marcus' multi-sited account of where and how commodity signs begin, live, and expire.<sup>6</sup> That means researching

production and distribution, cross-subsidy and monopoly profit, national and international public policy and press coverage, *inter alia*.

Consider Robert Jensen's celebrated work on how market equilibria have emerged in South Asian fishing thanks to the cell phone's ability to deliver pricing information along isolated waterways.<sup>7</sup> That essay's extraordinary impact on policy debates must be countered by an appreciation of the cell phone's reliance on the sexual violence that scars its origin and the electronic waste that is its legacy.<sup>8</sup>

A key lesson of cultural studies is the value of making the everyday central to politics rather than epiphenomenal or dilettantish. We have some great food examples to follow in such a project, from both academia and social movements.<sup>9</sup> The valuable collection you have just read is part of that hopefulness. Food sovereignty is a crucial aspect of global life in the twenty-first century. We need to be in the field and at the table.

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Toby Miller's latest books are *Greening the Media* (with Richard Maxwell, 2012) and *Blow Up the Humanities* (2012). You can follow his adventures at: [www.tobymiller.org](http://www.tobymiller.org) <<http://www.tobymiller.org>>.

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<sup>1</sup> Samir Amin, 'Contemporary Imperialism and the Agrarian Question', *Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 11–26. Rajeev Patel, 'Food Sovereignty: Power, Gender, and the Right to Food', *Public Library of Science—Medicine*, vol. 9, no. 6, p. e1001223.

<sup>2</sup> Toby Miller, *Cultural Citizenship: Cosmopolitanism, Consumerism, and Television in a Neoliberal Age*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 2007 and Toby Miller, *Television Studies: The Basics*, Routledge, London, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, trans. Christopher L. Chiappari and Silvia L. López, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1989; Néstor García Canclini, *Diferentes, desiguales y desconectados: Mapas de la interculturalidad*, Editorial Gedisa, Barcelona, 2004.

Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass, 1993; Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, trans. Catherine Porter, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Latour, *Politics of Nature*.

<sup>5</sup> Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*.

<sup>6</sup> Laura Nader, 'Up the Anthropologist—Perspectives Gained from Studying Up', *Reinventing Anthropology*, ed. Dell H. Hymes. Pantheon Books, New York, 1972, pp. 284–311; George Marcus, 'Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, no. 24, 1995, pp. 95–117.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Jensen, 'The Digital Provide: Information Technology, Market Performance, and Welfare in the South Indian Fisheries Sector', *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, vol. 122, no. 3, 2007, pp. 879–924.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller, *Greening the Media*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Krupczynski, 'Movable Feast: A Public Art Project to Promote Food System Change', *Rethinking Marxism*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2011, pp. 405–17; Amin; the Association for the Study of Food and Society; La Vía Campesina (see their *Cuadernos*); Comité de Seguridad Alimentaria.