

Devouring the Social Appetite

The Slow Food Story: Politics and Pleasure

By Geoff Andrews

McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 196pp, \$19.95, 2008

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Bite Me: Food in Popular Culture

By Fabio Parasecoli

Berg, Oxford, 168pp, \$29.95, 2008

ISBN 978 1 8452 0761 8

The Globalization of Food

Edited by David Inglis and Debra Gimlin

Berg, Oxford, 296pp, \$34.95, 2009

ISBN 978 1 84520 816 5

Reviewed by Lauren Williams and John Germov

Introduction

We live in an era seemingly obsessed with food, where celebrity chefs are household names—Jamie Oliver, Gordon Ramsay, Nigella Lawson, and Heston Blumenthal to name a few—and reality TV shows like *Master Chef* and *My Kitchen Rules* dominate the ratings. Food documentaries and books critiquing the food industry top the bestseller lists, such as Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* (2001; subsequently used as the basis for a Hollywood film), Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (2006), and Raj Patel's *Stuffed and Starved* (2008). Our hunger for food clearly goes beyond physical consumption to a desire to consume information about food. It comes as no surprise then that the academic study of food is also gaining force and developing into a substantial body of literature.

The three books reviewed here examine the social origins of why we eat the way we do—what we have previously referred to as the 'social appetite'—to distinguish socio-cultural perspectives on food and eating as opposed to biological or individualistic accounts (see Germov and Williams 2008). *The Slow Food Story* describes the rise of the Slow Food movement and its culinary, environmental, and ethical challenge to the global food industry. *Bite Me* uses pop culture to illustrate the ways in which food and foodways define us as individuals and as a society. The final book, *The Globalization of Food*, is an

edited collection of essays on the consequences of globalizing processes for food production and consumption. The contributions each makes to the literature of the social aspects of food and eating are examined in turn.

The Slow Food story: politics and pleasure

Geoff Andrews provides a detailed account of the rise of the Slow Food movement that aims to transform the way we produce and consume food—a global phenomenon which has continued to expand since the book was published and now has around 100,000 members in over 150 countries (Slow Food). Using the emblem of the snail, the movement promotes culinary diversity, indigenous ingredients, artisan techniques, fair trade and sustainable agriculture. As the subtitle of Andrews' book highlights, Slow Food blends political activism with the pleasure and sociality of producing, preparing, and sharing (quality) food. It is this cultural politics, mixing ethics with pleasure, that Andrews presents as explaining the unique appeal of Slow Food.

Andrews presents a readable and informative account of the origins and growing popularity of the movement, detailing its evolution, its activities and to a lesser extent its critics. His book complements the other major work in the field, Parkins and Craig's *Slow Living* (2006), which posited slow food as part of an alternative movement arising in opposition to our fast-paced society. Andrews' book is pitched at the educated lay public, though it makes use of scholarly sources and would be essential reading for any academics interested in the study of Slow Food. That said, this apparent attempt to bridge two potential readerships has its drawbacks. Andrews is a journalist and an academic, and at times the book segues between engaging with the scholarly literature, and journalistic accounts depicting the key players and events in Slow Food's history. Most of the key literature on Slow Food has been appropriately drawn upon, but it is a pity that many of the scholarly debates and critiques within this literature, and the broader alternative food and ethical consumption fields, are dealt with only superficially. While we accept it is always a judgment call about what to include or exclude, in our view too much space in the book was dedicated to overly detailed descriptive accounts of the movement's emergence and its key facets, crowding out the potential for greater analysis.

The Slow Food Story makes a number of important and insightful contributions to understanding the appeal of the movement. The pleasure focus of Slow Food means it avoids negative and oppositional discourses—it is not anti-globalisation or anti-capitalism despite its founders' origins in Italian left-wing politics. Andrews rightly states that part of Slow Food's success has been due to effective media use and successful culinary tourism events, which have

connected ‘foodies’, farmers, academics and chefs. Underlying its popularity is Slow Food’s emphasis on pleasure, which the movement claims is not meant to convey hedonism, but as Andrews reiterates, rather an appreciation of cultural tradition, non-standardisation and support for re-localised food production. Yet the findings of social science research on Slow Food to date indicate that members tend to exhibit a preference for gastronomic experiences over political action (Gaytan). As noted by Andrews, Slow Food founder Carlo Petrini has acknowledged this very issue—of many *convivia* (local Slow Food groups) merely acting as dinner clubs providing gourmet food experiences—which, while of benefit in supporting local produce, fails to address wider political issues within communities. An intriguing matter raised by Andrews is Petrini’s failure to convince members to drop the term *convivia* in favour of ‘food communities’, ostensibly because the latter lacked an elitist image. Petrini’s response to the elitist foodie club critique is to encourage *convivia* to seek out producers to become members, in his belief that the effectiveness of the movement lies in creating a network of producers and consumers, so that consumers can be transformed into what is termed ‘co-producers’ of their own food.

Andrews points out that Slow Food appeals to both radicals and conservatives alike; offering in our view an ideological ‘third way’ by extolling the democratic right to the pleasure of good food, whilst offering protection against the cultural and economic imperialism of global markets. Andrews notes there have been organisational problems in different countries, where the decentralised ground-up organisational structure can lead to problems. Indeed, shortly after the book was published, the fledgling Australian national Slow Food association was disbanded after many *convivia* members organised to oppose its centralised coordination of activities.

The Slow Food Story focuses mainly on Italy, US, and the UK, with a few references to other European countries. It conveys the great potential of the movement and its various innovations in a sympathetic way. It is a worthwhile addition to the alternative food movement literature, and an excellent description of Slow Food’s history, but would have benefited from subjecting the movement to more sustained critique.

Bite Me

Fabio Parasecoli’s salaciously entitled book seeks to further the area of food studies by examining the ‘layers of meaning that are often left unexplored’ (2) within the lived experience of pop culture. He defines pop culture as ‘*any form of cultural phenomenon, material item, practice, social relation, and even idea that is conceived, produced, distributed, and consumed within a market-driven economy*’ (4; our italics).

The author lives between Italy and the United States, working as both an academic and a journalist, and is the President of the Society for the Study of Food. His justification for the book is that, until recently, both food and pop culture have been viewed as rather 'low brow' topics of examination. He argues that it is important to study food and pop culture as they reflect the way in which food, eating and the body influence our society.

The book comprises an introduction outlining the author's approach to the analysis, six chapters, and an afterword. Each chapter deals with a different aspect of examining food in society, from the biological in Chapter 1 (how the brain works) to the social in Chapter 6 (cultural tourism). Pop culture examples are used to exemplify the points made, predominantly drawn from the world of film (or books which have become film) and television. The author draws upon his previously published academic works, as well as those of other authors from a breadth of disciplines, from Freud to Foucault, to examine food relationships through the lens of pop culture. Some theorists are mentioned more often than others, for example the work of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, but there is no overarching theoretical framework to the text. Rather, the content of each chapter is examined from the point of view of the theorist that applies to that topic; for example, the work of the psychoanalysts Freud and Melanie Klein are cited in the second chapter which examines the way in which psychiatry and psychoanalysis relate to food. In this chapter, Parasecoli notes that the pop cultural fascination with vampires is an extension of our earliest experience of eating as human beings—that is, ingestion by sucking milk as the product of the maternal body. His point is that the resurgence in popularity of films and television shows featuring vampire protagonists arises from our unconscious desire to revisit our deepest, narcissistic childhood desires of obtaining nourishment from the body. Cannibalism is also examined within this chapter.

In fact, vampirism and cannibalism are rather overemphasised throughout the book, perhaps due to a special interest in pop culture reproduction of these ideas by the author. Taken together with Chapter 4, 'Quilting the empty body: food and dieting' and Chapter 5, dealing with African-American bodies, this book is perhaps more about the body as a product, or even subject, of ingestion, than about food *per se*. In Chapter 3, which is about the worlds that are created by science fiction (utopias or dystopias, depending on the story), Parasecoli draws on Bourdieu's idea of *habitus* and Foucault's concept of power to discuss how eating and drinking are acts that form part of the *techniques of the body*.

The final chapter 'Tourism and taste' examines the role of tourism in changing food perceptions and behaviours. This chapter, while interesting, did not seem to sit well with the other chapters. While the definition of pop culture given might be stretched to include a discussion of the tourist experience, the other chapters drew so strongly on film and television that it was strange not to have examined

that experience through the medium of film or television. There are certainly a plethora of television series and specials about gourmet travel, and films where tourists find themselves dislocated from their sense of what constitutes food, that Parasecoli could have drawn on, and analysis of such sources would have improved the consistency of the work. The author concludes the book with a plea for pleasure, and again we see mention of the Slow Food movement, except this time from the perspective that it has grown too politically focused, lamenting that the aspect of pleasure may have been forgotten.

As mentioned, most of the pop culture references are from film or television, with some from the written word, but few from the Internet. Some reference is made to YouTube in Chapter 5, but it would have been interesting to include more analysis of these newer sources, although Parasecoli acknowledges at the outset that the pop culture sources follow his personal interest. While truly multidisciplinary in scope and theorists, the book will be of particular interest to students of cultural and media studies, and any disciplines with an interest in food, from the sociological to the nutritional. The book is written in a manner accessible to the educated lay reader with a passion for food, and at least a passing interest in popular culture. This work adds to the literature on food and society, through the lens of pop culture which, after all, reflects back to us, if not reality, then the version of reality we are happy to consume.

The Globalization of Food

The Globalization of Food explores the impact of globalization on food production and consumption, showing the centrality and importance of food politics in our lives. The book comprises 15 chapters from 21 authors from the US, UK, Europe and Australia, though there is no preface to explain how the volume was assembled. Contributing author biographies providing more information than current university affiliation would have been helpful, given that the only hint the reader gets of the disciplinary background of the authors is to be gleaned from the chapter content. The authors are apparently from diverse backgrounds, both in the geographic and the disciplinary sense.

The book is divided into three parts: a substantial introductory chapter, a section on food production and distribution, and a section on food preparation and consumption. The editors' introductory chapter provides an expansive discussion of globalization as it pertains to food, providing a good overview of the key debates within the globalization literature. Inglis and Gimlin highlight the social, cultural, economic and political dimensions of globalization,

preferring to pluralise the term as ‘globalizations’ to acknowledge its multiple forms and differing impacts across the regions of the world. The editors propose the following ‘working definition’ of globalizing processes related to food:

The multiple modes of interaction (e.g. connection, penetration and mutual, although not necessarily equally weighted, influencing and restructuring) of the economic, political, social and cultural dimensions of globalization (i.e. forces, processes, institutions, structures, actors, networks, etc.) as these affect food-related matters, and as the latter in turn come to affect the former, in a series of ongoing dialectical relations characterized by the constant generation of forms of complexity. (9; original italics)

Thankfully, the remainder of the chapter is not as longwinded or opaque. On the same page the editors point out that ‘it is not enough to study food consumption in isolation from the means of production’ and state their preference for analytic syntheses that avoid ‘unhelpful dyads’ and integrate ‘structure with agency, materiality with symbolism’, noting some chapters in their collection have done just that. It’s somewhat intriguing then that the book structure divides chapters between production and consumption, though this divide is somewhat artificial given that several chapters traverse both. These quibbles aside, the introductory chapter does a good job of historically situating food globalization, from early forms in centuries past to the contemporary period. The editors draw out the key issues covered in the book chapters in a synthetic rather than chronological way, making this chapter more substantive than the obligatory overviews of chapters that can appear in some edited works. Inglis and Gimlin conclude that the ‘general thematic’ of the book is that ‘food globalizations are many and manifold, not singular and uniform’ (31).

The production and distribution section of the book contains six chapters, and in the opening chapter we again find a discussion on Slow Food, used here as an example of the politics of food. Other chapters deal with globalization from the perspective of food production standards (aquaculture in Chapter 3 and Fairtrade products in Chapter 7), food locales (Chapter 4), the global governance of the wine trade (Chapter 5), and the scale of food systems (Chapter 6). The chapters vary in the scope with which they consider production and distribution issues, and an alternative way to view this section would have been through treatment of key themes, such as valorisation of the local, or the consequences for food producers of globalization.

Chapter 3 by Marianne Lien is a particularly interesting and lucidly written account of how globalised aquaculture has challenged the definitions of food, food standards and international trade, using the example of Tasmanian Atlantic salmon—which we would point out is a paradox of nomenclature in that Tasmania is nowhere near the Atlantic—to exemplify the complexity of

these issues. Also instructive is discussion of scale research in geography by the authors of Chapter 6, and the reminder that scale (local versus global) is socially constructed, non-permanent and relational. In Chapter 7, Caroline Wright gives a clear analysis of the relationship between Fairtrade and globalization, and reminds the reader that globalization does not necessarily equate to capitalism. The definition of globalization that Wright gives in her chapter (141) is more accessible than that given by the editors.

The final section of the book tends to be more internally cohesive than section 2, and deals with food preparation and consumption. The eight short chapters discuss the themes of how food helps establish a national or cultural identity (Chapters 8, 9, 11, 12 and 13), as well as personal identity (Chapter 10). In Chapter 10, Danielle Gallegos looks at the Mediterranean diet to examine nutrition as a pathway to risk minimisation. The role of environmental sustainability is also considered by Gallegos which, somewhat surprisingly, is not mentioned elsewhere in the book aside from a passing reference in Chapter 4 and a very brief section in Chapter 6.

While the book covers an ambitious range of topics, there are a few notable omissions such as 'third world' hunger, environmental sustainability, and genetically modified foods. In view of these gaps it is somewhat odd that a chapter on obesity was included. Although the chapter is fascinating and well written, it is more about the nutritional consequences of globalization than it is about food, especially since it also discusses the contribution of physical activity to obesity.

As editors of a similar collection of chapters, we are well aware of the challenges in achieving a consistent voice through multiple authors, and this book does not quite achieve it. If the editors gave the authors a brief to consider their topic from the point of view of globalization (as one would imagine they did), some authors seem to have ignored it. The fact that the chapter authors employ different theoretical frameworks and perspectives adds to both the richness and confusion in this work. The book will appeal to a broad readership, and will be useful to students of food studies, food sociology, as well as disciplines considering nutrition.

Conclusion: slow, popular, and global social appetites

Food is as fundamental to our cultural, social and personal life as it is to our physical survival. In quite different ways, the three books reviewed here advance our understanding of the social appetite—the social organisation, distribution, preparation and consumption of food. The symbolic and material pleasures and politics of food are rightly the province of many disciplines, from sociology and anthropology, to cultural studies, psychology, human geography and public health nutrition, in addition to the interdisciplinary field of food studies. Collectively, these books provide an entrée to these differing though often compatible approaches to studying the social origins of food.

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