

The Social Life of Food

A Sociology of Food and Nutrition: The Social Appetite (3rd edition)
Edited by John Germov and Lauren Williams
Oxford University Press, 425pp, \$49.95, 2010
ISBN: 9780195551501

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The recent success of food documentaries, such as *Food Inc* and *The Community Solution: How Cuba Survived Peak Oil*, suggests not only the popularity of 'food' as a topic but also indicates growing social awareness of and interest in the role of food in a global system dominated by the manipulation (and scientisation) of agricultural production. Community gardens and growers' markets are expanding rapidly across the globe, as a new appreciation of locally grown, and often chemical-free food influences consumers' daily habits. So it is timely to explore the third edition of *A Sociology of Food and Nutrition: The Social Appetite* (2010), a book that takes readers on a journey through the complex and politically vexed question of food consumption.

A Sociology of Food and Nutrition is the result of a collaboration between sociologist John Germov and dietician Lauren Williams. The editors' interdisciplinary partnership is reflected in a book that traverses a range of disciplines including anthropology, public health, gender studies, psychology, epidemiology and more. Germov and Williams draw on Charles Wright Mills' idea of the 'sociological imagination' to examine how we, as social agents, interact with food. They argue, for example, that 'food and eating are imbued with social meanings and are closely associated with people's social interactions in both formal and informal settings' (6) and explore the idea that the 'personal is political' in relation to food industries and the promotion of health messages.

The book is divided into five cohesive parts logically commencing with 'An Appetiser' that introduces the reader to the key themes of the book, including what we eat and why, the application of sociology to food, and trends in food production. This is followed by the subsequent parts: 'The Food System: Globalisation and Agribusiness'; 'Food and Nutrition Discourses, Politics and Policies'; 'Food Consumption, Social Differentiation and Identity'; and 'Food and the Body: Civilising Processes and Social Embodiment'. *A Sociology of Food and Nutrition* is essentially a banquet that entices the reader to reconsider how we as individuals, in connection (and sometimes in opposition) with society, make choices about our diets that, in turn, have effects on the (social and physical) body.

Germov and Williams have organised their book in a logical and easy to follow manner that makes the chapters accessible to a variety of readers regardless of their disciplinary base. Chapter Two: 'World Hunger: Its Roots and Remedies' offers the kind of 'big picture' explanation required to set up this discussion from a social justice perspective. Rather than perpetuating the myth of the 'scarcity frame' in relation to world hunger, Moore Lappe stresses the need to re-evaluate, stating: 'We breathe in like invisible ether this scarcity-as-cause and economic-growth-as-cure framing, making it difficult to even register the contradictory evidence that is all around us' (30). The effect of power regimes on food production is a central theme in this chapter, where the denial of access to land has clearly limited the 'capacity to act' for many families in the Global South.

The rest of this section discusses unsustainable food production and highlights the role of global capitalism in exacerbating environmental problems. Terry Leahy uses the example of permaculture to argue effectively for the ill-effects of the monoculture resulting from large scale agricultural production. Continuing on this theme but focusing more on the scientisation and corporatisation of food, Geoffrey Lawrence and Janet Grice overview the 'appropriationism' and 'substitutionism' used in agribusiness (Chapter 4). In Chapter Five, Jane Dixon deploys a 'cultural economy' approach to explore the questionable practices of supermarkets in influencing/creating consumer habits to further increase the strength of the prevailing duopoly (as is the case in Australia).

Moving on to the much-contested area of public health, Jennifer Lisa Falbe and Marion Nestle examine the highly political domain of government dietary advice. It is clearly demonstrated here that the most influential stakeholders in public health are the lobby groups representing the food industries. This trend is further discussed in Chapter Seven, where Lawrence and Germov outline the current debate on (and function of) so-called 'functional foods'. These are foods that provide health benefits beyond nutrition and make claims to offer specific health benefits, such as reduced susceptibility to certain diseases. This chapter examines the specific example of folic acid fortification of staple foods, amongst others, and asks the question: who benefits and who is potentially at risk from such mandatory inclusion? It seems the potential health risks to those in the community who do not need increased folic acid have not been fully accounted for. It is important to note, however, that there is more to functional foods than the examples given in this chapter, which focuses more on 'additives' than natural foods such as blueberries, for example, which are also promoted as a functional food. The intent is to demonstrate the role of food industries in constructing a need for their products and extracting the largest possible profit.

Although the humble blueberry farmer would surely welcome an increase in profits, I imagine their marketing would not be as aggressive and targeted, nor would they have the industry leverage of the ‘manufactured’ food companies.

Elizabeth Murphy’s chapter on infant feeding provides an excellent discussion on an issue that is highly pertinent for mothers in that it includes analysis of ongoing prejudices concerning women’s social roles. Often, for public health professionals, the issue of breast feeding is presented as a ‘personal’ or individual choice and structural factors (such as class) are not often considered. Elizabeth Murphy here emphasises the link between feeding and widespread social perceptions that the mother’s social role is as a kind of moral guardian. Murphy’s even-handed discussion in this chapter ultimately contends breast feeding advocates need to consider both the cultural conditions and material contexts that affect breast feeding. A useful addition to this chapter might be an exploration of those mothers who are physically unable to breastfeed.

The theme of sustainable food production is taken up again in Deirdre Wick’s discussion of vegetarianism. This chapter also continues another theme of the book which focuses on the role of power and exploitation as applied to food. Wick draws on the work of anthropologist Mary Douglas to expose the link between meat consumption and patriarchal power structures—a legitimate analysis especially when we consider the role of meat as ‘status’ in hunter gatherer societies, despite women being responsible for the collection of the majority of a group’s daily calorific intake. The social construction of meat consumption is also highlighted by this chapter’s focus on uses of language in food production and consumption, especially the way in which names for animals are altered once they have been butchered, from sheep to lamb, cow to beef and so on (289).

The final section of the book focuses on the interconnection between food and bodies. Williams and Germov explore the ‘thin ideal’ for women by means of a discussion on structural versus post-structural approaches, and conclude that a synthesis between the two is necessary in order to fully understand the way we ‘do’ our ‘body work’. However, it is important to mention here that some women will by virtue of their social positioning be more enabled to exercise ‘agency’ than others. Williams and Germov conduct a semiotic analysis of magazine covers to demonstrate the role of history and culture in defining and re-shaping the ideal body shape for women. Cultural and historical factors are also drawn on in the subsequent chapters on eating disorders and the stigmatisation of obesity, concluding another theme of this book concerned to map the way we mark out our identity via interaction with food.

There are many worthy chapters in this book, and unfortunately it is not possible to comprehensively review them all. Although the editors do not claim

to be all encompassing in terms of their social food journey, they have done justice to the topic by providing many relevant case studies that successfully reveal our relationship with food. I do feel however, there are two topics of direct relevance to this book that would complement and round out the discussion. My suggestion, for the fourth edition, would be a case study of the social role of the community garden movement; particularly the role of such gardens in incorporating migrant gardening traditions. Food is clearly a source of cultural transmission and such gardens are highly successful in promoting and maintaining cultural identity (especially for refugees who may have fled their homeland without any form of 'transportable' culture). I would also like to see a specific chapter on food security. Although food insecurity is mentioned in Moore Lappe's chapter on world hunger, Leahy's discussion on unsustainable food production and McIntosh and Kubena's work on food and ageing, there is indeed much more that could be explored here, especially with regard to the many food based community programs offered both internationally and in Australia.

As a frequent user of Germov's *Public Sociology: An Introduction to Australian Society*, a text often set on university curricula, I am familiar with the chapter layout and recommendations for additional sources of information to extend student learning. This user-friendly approach has been successfully translated to *A Sociology of Food and Nutrition*—making it an excellent student resource. But the target audience is not limited. Anyone with an interest in food and society, across a range of disciplines will find this book both engaging and informative. The book also serves as a general reader for anyone with a conscience/consciousness about food.

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