

Democracy at the Table

The Taste for Civilization: Food, Politics and Civil Society

By Janet A. Flammang

University of Illinois Press, 325pp, \$25.00, 2009

ISBN 978-0-252-07673-2

Reviewed by Bethaney A. Turner

Whilst researchers are increasingly concerned with contextualizing our everyday, local food practices in relation to international issues such as climate change, rising food costs and concerns over food security, Janet A. Flammang offers a systematic analysis of the role of food, or foodwork—the planning, growing, purchasing, preparation and serving of food—in underpinning the civic values which maintain democracy. She writes specifically of America, but the ideas are highly relevant to an international audience, including Australia. Indeed, she makes a compelling case to broaden the purview of civil society to include what she refers to as ‘household foodwork’. As she notes, it is an area overlooked within her discipline of political science for three key reasons: firstly, it is gendered work; secondly, foodwork destabilises the deep-seated privileging of mind over body in Western philosophical and political thought; and lastly, because it is about appetite and taste, which are all too readily relegated to the realm of individual subjectivity and the exercising of personal control, when they can in fact tell us much about our socio-cultural context.

Of course, food and foodwork are mightily important in all of our lives and Flammang extols their potential to shape and promulgate the civic virtues of thoughtfulness and generosity. For her the table around which we eat teaches us the skills necessary for civilized relationships. The key is the skill of conversation. The table, and its conversations, are offered as significant sites for forming generational connections, learning and practicing culturally specific or significant familial rituals, as well as learning manners. These everyday familial activities socialise us and equip us with the knowledge and skills to operate effectively in public life. However, we run the risk of producing younger generations incapable of fulfilling their duties and obligations in civil society; generations ill-prepared for diplomatic conversation due to the increasing work hours of their parents and competition from an ever-increasing array of screen based activities.

Persuasive as these ideas are, I still recoil somewhat at the importance ascribed to manners, as if frightened by the weight of societal judgement related to what seem to be inconsequential and rather irrelevant conventions. Of course,

food is so often about conventions, which is why we can learn so much about people, culture and society through its study, but I doubt whether civic virtues require one to know which eating implement to wield when. I suspect Flammang would agree here, but my bodily cringe at the mention of manners suggests that, for some, the intersection of the alien public domain into the intimate familial setting is quite an uneasy one warranting further exploration. It is also here that the bodily nature of foodwork could be further emphasized. Flammang notes that '[m]anners make table conversation possible' (99). As such, it is disciplined bodies which facilitate the 'courtesy of a conversation' which she locates as 'an essential building block of civil society' (99). Whilst Flammang's work certainly contributes to destabilizing the privileging of the mind in the mind/body binary, I would have liked to see more body in the text. This would illustrate and emphasise the ways in which rules, regulations and rituals are habitualised bodily actions able to be given new life in different settings. Growing, provisioning, preparing and consuming food are embodied experiences. A carefully prepared meal, a plate full of homegrown veggies, the arrival of casseroles from family, friends and neighbours in times of need, are all non-verbal acts demonstrating and teaching the civic virtues of generosity and thoughtfulness. We can learn a great deal from table talk, but so too can we from the careful observation of and participation in the art of nurturing bodies, as grower, careful consumer and dedicated cook. Still, I come away from the text deeply engaged with the foundational role of generosity and thoughtfulness in civil society and, also, with the complementary and interconnected ideas of practices of care and trust, as articulated and embodied through foodwork.

Of course, the ground Flammang covers is quite familiar territory within disciplines such as anthropology and sociology which take seriously the everyday practices of our lives. We know that food matters. We know that the personal is political. But Flammang presents us with an artful argument from a different sphere. The ideas are closely and carefully developed in the early chapters to firmly situate the work within the Western philosophical tradition upon which her discipline of political science rests. However, it is once the abstract concepts find themselves grounded in her detailed analysis of Alice Waters' *Delicious Revolution* that you feel the constraints of the discipline loosen somewhat and the prose is lightened and enlivened. The *Delicious Revolution*, as Flammang writes, 'illustrates how one woman [Californian restaurateur, Alice Waters] fused delicious food with both a political philosophy and practical applications in her community' (173). It is premised on the notion that 'good food is a right, not a privilege'. It aims to encourage critical participation in the food system from the production of local, organic food in jails and schools to the importance of creating savvy food consumers able to purchase accurately labeled organic goods. I hear echoes here of Stephanie Alexander, the pioneer of

a systematic program of school kitchen gardens in Australia, and, of course, also the exhortations of other famous Australian cooks, Margaret Fulton and Maggie Beer: local, seasonal, shared food is best.

Flammang's case study is treated well, and serves effectively to ground and allow detailed exploration of the possibilities of foodwork in relation to civil society as alluded to in the early chapters. In the analysis of the Delicious Revolution, the table as a site of civic virtue finds itself discussed alongside gardens and farmers markets because, as the author notes, 'given the time crunch at the family table, civilizing practices need to be fostered in as many settings as possible' (174). Foodwork is important because it is about multiple points of connection, not just with family or the community, but with the land and the environment. There is little attention to the latter in this book, but many others are filling this gap. Instead the focus here is on how we build and maintain civil society. The text is very much about future proofing; about developing guidelines to prevent, or at least delay, disconnection from others, society and the environment, particularly for those living in urban areas. Disconnection seems to be increasingly built into our lives and lifestyles, from an urban planning focus on densification in cities, to the overworked workforce with little time for foodwork. Alongside the need to degender foodwork, Flammang calls for reduced work hours to allow people to focus on food and the table, the civic virtues this can promote and, thus, the contribution to democratic practices it can make. In the meantime, as occurs in the Delicious Revolution, much of this now must occur in spaces outside the home such as school kitchen gardens.

Even if food and foodwork is degendered, I do wonder how many people would choose to use more non-work time to focus on foodwork. Such an initiative would of course require a simultaneous increase in education or support for people who have actually become so disconnected from the food system that cooking and sourcing fresh food, let alone growing their own, would feel overwhelming. This is, of course, a problem arguably solved by food itself in communal gardening plots where we can learn from others or in food co-ops and farmers markets where people share ways of using their produce. But, I suspect the people willing to get involved in these activities are already the converted. I think there are far too many people that will remain untouched by this Revolution. Still, Flammang convinces me that foodwork makes a significant contribution to constructing and supporting civic virtues, civil society and, consequently, democracy itself. It is certainly a revolution worth fighting for.

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