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Keywords

food politics, agro-food systems, food and inequalities

Food occupies a fundamental place in human life. As the product of land, water, and sun, food connects us to nature and ties us to global cycles and ecological systems. Warren Belasco (2002) pointed out that in the United States, food is the biggest industry, largest export, and our most frequently indulged pleasure. Food is also intensely political. Recurring hunger strikes, food riots, agrofood lobbyism, and food scares confirm that food delivers politics directly to one's plate and into the body. But even in mundane circumstances, such as when ordering a serving of fast food at a drive-through or indulging in sushi at an elite food establishment, we face questions of food safety, quality, public health, and ethics. Writing about food politics, Marion Nestle (2006) makes this point more succinctly by arguing that stepping into a supermarket in North America now feels more like a minefield laced with biotechnological advancements, scientific debates, and agrofood industries' interests, rather than an experience of sociality.

In addition to these individual consumer dilemmas that many of those living in the Global North face, the politics of food also involves global issues of labor, justice, subsistence, inequalities, and the right to eat. This includes those working in the fields, in transportation and packaging and in processing plants and restaurants, where regulatory regimes exist but workers continue to face high concentrations of chemicals applied to the products and often do not receive minimum wage nor health insurance. Paradoxically, as more nutritional facts are available on the labels and more information is provided about the places of food origins and production processes for many "gourmet" products, the less we know about the labor, institutions, and people involved in the ever lengthening food chains. The globalization of food supply systems has led to connecting remote groups and cultures into deeply exploitative relationships with colonial centers and feeding the desires of primarily wealthy consumers. (Friedberg, 2004; Goodman & Watts, 1997; Minz, 1985).

When we first issued a call for papers for our special issue on cultures of food in *Cultural Studies/Critical Methodologies*, we were most interested in the power dimensions of food and eating that revolve around power

hierarchies. We were hoping to explore and expose how food systems play an integral part in the reproduction of inequalities of class, race and ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and age, among many others. We also focused on the role of food in performing new forms of globality that embody new configurations of capital, science, technology, space, and other institutions that together work to standardize tastes, lifestyles, and definitions of health and hygiene. Our aim was to rethink food as a political process through which power relationships are, and have been, made and unmade.

We were fortunate to receive a number of excellent papers that reflected the interplay of resistance and domination in food. The authors of these papers—those whose articles are featured in this special issue as well as those whose outstanding papers did not fit comfortably in its current framework—have reminded us that when focusing on food, the political dimension is inseparable from biophysical, social, cultural, and economic aspects of food systems. In every project, food politics was deeply connected to history, institutional cultures, economic relationships, science and knowledge production, identity politics, and national imaginaries. As a result, this special issue reconfirms and extends the nuanced understanding of power as exercised through subjects, objects, institutions, and discourses rather than as an external form of domination, an approach taken by the poststructuralist school of thought. Following this theoretical framework, this special issue explores how power works through tastes, bureaucracies, institutions, and body politics, as well as how it is manifested in the everyday meal that in itself is the culmination of power struggles and reveals many aspects of a culture's cosmology.

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More specifically, this special issue contributes to a social economy approach (Appadurai, 1990; Crang, Claire, & Jackson, 2003; Dixon, 1999; Du Gay & Pryke, 2002; Mintz, 1985; Ray & Sayer, 1999) and takes a macroperspective on food preparation and eating practices, which are often considered mundane. Such an approach builds on the political economy perspective that evolved over the past three decades and has been used to highlight the issues of power and inequalities in food systems. In agrofood studies, for example, embracing the Agrarian question by Karl Kautsky recentered the impact of capitalist norms of production on food. And William Friedland (1984) applied a commodity system analysis framework to study the political economy of specific commodities that helped to reveal many aspects of food and power, including how corporate agriculture used the state to suppress workers. Lawrence Busch and William Lacy (1986) used a sociology of knowledge/science framework to illuminate the forces behind the trajectories of agricultural science and demonstrate how scientific knowledge of food links the power of states, corporations, and scientists.

Continuing along these lines, Harriet Friedmann and Philip McMichael (1989) introduced the concept of “food regimes” on the basis of global configurations of power, including producing and consuming regions, highlighting structures, actors, and power relationships. Building upon world systems analysis (Wallerstein, 1974) of agriculture and food trade, this approach exposed the centrality of colonial and postcolonial developments in the organization of food production and distribution to the modern world system.

While taking such a political economy perspective, this special issue also emphasizes the cultural dimensions of food and eating. The articles in this volume suggest that the economic global-structural inequalities that are reproduced through food systems are deeply situated within the social fabric, cultural practices, and the production of symbolic meaning. As Pierre Bourdieu argues, culture is not only a constitutive part of domination and exploitation systems but is also a vehicle through which inequalities are reproduced and experienced. And the way that different societies around the world have been forced to define themselves reflects a legacy of inequality and colonialism that are manifested in each culture’s foodways.

In terms of methodology, many scholars within the field of food studies have adopted Actor–Network Theory (ANT) as one of the ways to follow food chains connecting the Global South, where food is produced, packaged, labeled, and shipped and where it is experienced both as a source of nutrition and as an exploitative workplace, and the Global North, where food is consumed and where large amounts of it are disposed (Fitzsimmons & Goodman, 1998; Murdoch, 1997; Morgan & Murdoch, 2000). Founded in science and technology studies, ANT provides insight that helps to connect the social, the political, and the cultural with the material agency of food systems. While authors in this special issue

have not explicitly followed ANT, the case studies presented here draw heavily on this approach in that they consider the geometries of power that are produced through material practices and spaces and food itself. When we look more carefully at the materiality—at how food is consumed (e.g., alone or in groups or families) and where it is consumed (e.g., at homes, coffee houses, cars, or hospitals)—and juxtapose these actual practices with the widely spread normative discourses (such as the univocal or unequivocal support for family dinners or healthy food claims; see Wilk, this issue), the power dimension of food consumption is made even more visible and legible.

Furthermore, throughout this special issue we seek to challenge and reflect upon the place of food studies as an academic discipline. As many scholars have already demonstrated, food studies have emerged as an exemplary case of interdisciplinarity that works across the boundaries of anthropology, sociology, history, philosophy, cultural studies, community health and development studies, among others. Topics that are deemed to be relevant and taught within this field are just as diverse and include research spanning the work of anthropologists exploring neolithic diets to the critical analyses of the industrial food ethics, biotechnologies, and food advertising. In response to this transdisciplinarity, we envision a second move within this emerging field that involves the relocation of the “food subject” to the center of academic disciplines. We make a case that because food is so central for physical sustenance and social well-being and because it is a common denominator of human experience, it deserves to be studied in and of itself as a field of social action, rather than an artifact external to social issues. In sociology, for example, access to food—whether one can procure nutritious, healthy, safe, and culturally valuable food or whether one is starving or overfed—reveals not only one’s place in global and local social structures but also plays a central role in producing human subjectivities and bodies, just like those constituted through embodied experiences of gender, race, and social class.

There are six articles in this special issue, and the order of these articles reveals a move through diverse sites where food is consumed, produced, and imagined. It starts with Richard Wilk’s examination of family dinners in North America and moves to Suzie Ferrie’s analysis of institutional food in Australian hospitals, to Yi-Ping Shih and Cheng-Heng Chang’s study of public life in coffee houses in colonial and postcolonial Taiwan. Building on the theme of colonization, Jonathan Robins focuses on colonial diets in British Colonial Africa, while Fabio Parasecoli’s article on geographic indicators and gender relationships brings us to postcolonial contexts where food laws contribute to the reproduction of global inequalities. Amory Starr’s analysis of alternative agrofood movements concludes by exploring how power relationships and institutions can be resisted, unmade, and reimagined.

Richard Wilk, anthropologist and one of the founding scholars of contemporary food studies, focuses on family dinners to interrogate the ideological power of the idealized family meal. By investigating the actual eating practices and how they are constructed by social and political institutions, Wilk highlights the substantial gap between the performative and the normative and emphasizes the ideological component of family meals in the context of a larger cultural trend in many postindustrial societies where the solutions to social issues are increasingly displaced from public institutions to private lives. An important part of this process is the construction of normative family dinners through which different family models—such as dinners in households run by single parents or eating alone—emerge as deviant and even delinquent.

Suzie Ferrie, a practitioner and scholar of nutrition and dietetics, examines hospital food as a technology for exerting institutional power over the patient. By tracking changes in the use of technology to standardize hospitalization processes, the author investigates how the power relationships found within hospitals are produced and performed on the bodies of the patients. Ferrie demonstrates that the practices that often involve tube-feeding patients expose deeply troubling issues with modern definitions of food, disease, and health, and she highlights the ways in which food in hospitals are used by some patients as sites of resistance.

The article by Yi-Ping Shih and Cheng-Heng Chang, two sociologists, explores the history of coffeehouse culture in Taiwan to examine the layers of colonization and globalization in East Asia. By examining the transnational industries and mass consumption of coffee, the authors track changes in how coffee was accepted and resisted in Taiwan. Through a history of the evolution of coffeehouse culture, this article demonstrates how Western culture has become entangled with the Chinese and Japanese colonial legacy. Using coffee as a prism for understanding experiences of colonialism and postcolonialism in Taiwan, the authors argue that processes of colonization of Taiwan are permeated with Western cultural, political, and economic hegemony.

In his analysis of food practices and politics during the British colonization of Northern Nigeria between 1900 and 1914, Jonathan Robins, a historian, considers how Britons consumed food in the material and social contexts of colonialism and argues that food was an important tool for upholding boundaries between rulers and the ruled. Robins contends that colonial attitudes toward food expose the tension between propaganda and practice in contemporary texts that enthusiastically supported Britain's "civilizing mission" in Nigeria, while acknowledging the colonizers' dependency on the local knowledge, agricultural practices, and labor. Robins highlights the contradictions of the colonial experience for both the colonizer and the colonized and

how these contradictions were negotiated in farms, kitchens, and meals.

Cultural and food studies scholar Fabio Parasecoli brings out the importance of gender in understanding the reproduction of global and local power inequalities in food systems. By focusing on geographic indicators (GIs), a set of policies that protect the place of origin of the product, Parasecoli questions who reaps the benefits of the techniques and know-how transmitted by women from one generation to the other. Parasecoli shows that GIs impose a set of new relationships between food, place, and local tradition. In four case studies—desi ghee, shea butter, argan oil, and cheese, Parasecoli finds that through an intricate system of record keeping and public politics, GIs favor male producers and corporations, rendering the actual food producers and bearers of knowledge as the losers of the new food laws and marketing systems.

Finally, sociologist Amory Starr examines the development of local food institutions from a social movement perspective. Starr's article documents how over the past decade a number of institutions emerged seeking to shorten the links between producer and consumer and connecting farmers, agronomic experts, retailers, chefs, food writers, and several distinct consumer sectors. Building on the work of Alberto Melucci, Starr makes a case that local food institutions are coalescing into a new form of social movement that is challenging not only the existing food distribution system but also the foundations of consumer society where labor, inequalities, and production practices have been invisible. Starr's project brings an important contribution to the debate about the nature of social power by articulating the connections between local agrofood systems and the issues of activism, social change, and the politics of consumption.

Throughout the special issue, several shared thematic threads have emerged, highlighting different aspects of power relationships that are embodied and reproduced through food. The first theme deals with technologies of power and specifically with connections between food and record keeping. Focusing on records, literacy, and writing, this theme demonstrates that language is inseparable from contemporary food politics and calls attention to the methodological issues surrounding studying food production and consumption. Second, the authors highlight the centrality of colonialism and imperialism in the shaping of current food consumption, production, and distribution patterns. Finally, one of the central questions explored in each paper is how food functions as a site for reconfirming social order as well as challenging it. This theme reveals the undetermined and often contradictory forms of power embedded in food systems.

The first thematic thread explores the role that literacy plays in food practices, a topic that is often overlooked in scholarly work. In the case of colonial Nigeria, Robins shows that what we know about Nigerian diets and agriculture today is based on the writings of British colonialists

and early writers who approached locals as uncivilized and backwards and their diets as primitive and not worth studying. Similarly, in his article on GIs and gender, Parasecoli reveals how the basis for determining which products can claim protection under the GI laws use written archival sources as the only legitimate source for establishing the authenticity of the cooking method and food's connection to the specific locale, which means that women's voices and cooking practices do not qualify and, in effect, cannot be protected by the laws. In addition, even today women rarely pursue exclusive GI rights to food because they lack the institutional knowledge and the legal parlance, while larger enterprises and corporations have the necessary institutional infrastructure to support their applications, becoming the holders of exclusive rights to the recipes and entire food cultures.

More broadly, Wilk makes a case that academic writing has also produced significant epistemological blind spots impacting public debates, social imaginaries, and actual policies. In his article on family dinners, Wilk shows that social scientists have often uncritically accepted the normative discourses of happy family dinners by failing to draw conceptual boundaries between the normative and the analytic. As a public institution, social studies of food have yet to foster serious debates about what constitutes family, community, exploitation, and social change as they are produced through food systems. In this sense, language and scientific practice are central in the organization of food economies and the reinforcement of social hierarchies.

A second shared theme focuses on the ideological dimension of food and eating, by investigating how food weaves into cultural hegemonies of the Global North and reinforces local inequalities at the same time. Ferrie's study of hospital food diets reveals how nutritional science conceals and reproduces the cultural hegemony of North European immigrants in Australia. Although Australian society is culturally diverse, hospital food codifies the superiority of the Northern European culture, rendering patients coming from different places as well as the aborigines themselves as the Other.

Not only does food weave into the system of European domination spun by colonial institutions but it also serves as a method for marking the bodies and practices of the locals as uncivilized, unclean, and dangerous. In their analysis of coffeehouse culture in colonial Taiwan, Shih and Chang show how coffee consumption in Taiwanese cities served as a cultural marker to distinguish the higher class of colonialists from the lower levels of local consumers. Similarly, in his article on GIs, Parasecoli, highlights how colonial regimes of superiority continue to be practiced today when the authenticity of the local foods cooked by women at homes in former colonies are judged by the male jury members from former colonial centers and according to the tastes of European pallets.

Relevant here is also that the colonial discourses and practices were directly related to emerging experiences of globality. By looking in depth at food, we can see how colonialism brought the kinds of social and symbolic capital that tied local social structures into global systems of exploitation. The British colonial experience, as demonstrated in Robins' analysis, reveals the early years of a global food industry serving the needs and desires of expatriate communities in a faraway land, communities that would eventually become a defining feature of the contemporary world, and global food cultures. Today, the impact of European colonialism on many food cultures continues, but has been extended by the emergence of a world food system and global culture, which still emanates from European and Euro-American colonial centers and reinforces the same hierarchies and structural inequalities.

Finally, the authors are concerned with food as a method for reconfirming social order and, especially, with its potential to bring about social change. Among other articles that deal with this theme, Starr's analysis of local food movements addressed the issues surrounding food and social change most explicitly. Starr's argument builds on the emerging scholarship on consumption (Cohen et al., 2005; Mardsen, 1999; Michelletti, 2003; Zukin & Maguire, 2004) as carrying political agency to challenge the conceptual division between the political and economic spheres. Within this framework, local food systems open ways for the emergence of alternative economies where food is produced justly and with a concern for the environment. Starr goes even further to suggest that these alternative agrofood networks expand our understanding of social relationships in the postindustrial era as well as being in and acting in the world.

More broadly, contributions to this special issue underscore the complex and often contradictory aspects surrounding food production and consumption. In this respect, food emerges as a site for exerting domination and opening ways for resistance. For example, Ferrie's study of hospital diets shows how, on the one hand, patients engage in active resistance by refusing food, acquiring the forbidden food, or pretending that they are eating when observed, and on the other, how eating the prescribed diets in hospitals enables the patient to perform as a "good" obedient patient yielding to the institutional power.

In the same vein, Shih and Chang suggest that food and eating can play a dual and often contradictory role in colonial regimes. By looking at coffeehouses, they argue that these places emerged not only as the centers for exerting Western Europe's cultural hegemony but also as breeding grounds for political activism and resistance. Today, coffee is an important profitable commodity controlled by a few major corporations like Starbuck's based in the Global North, while the raw material, the bean itself, is only produced in the Global South. The story of coffee in Taiwan

suggests that there are no fixed and predetermined meanings of food and that food is part of the ongoing negotiations and transformations that are taking place in societies.

We hope that the themes we bring together in this special issue contribute to and extend the rich interdisciplinary debates about how power relationships and systems are made and unmade through food. The articles that we have included offer concrete examples of the innovative and critical methodologies required to effectively analyze and highlight the nuances of the power structures embedded in the world food system, including historical research, ethnography, policy analysis, and public discourse analysis. The articles themselves reinforce the notion that scholarly studies of food require an extensive toolbox, with methods and strategies developed in many different disciplines. Our special issue highlights through food, the complex dimensions of globalization and its relationship to the local, the institutional, and the postcolonial. We see this as an extension of critical and reflexive studies of food that not only push the limitations of many disciplines but also make the conceptual and systematic links between race, class, and gender visible.

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Bio

Ezekiel Flannery is Assistant Professor of Languages and Cultural Studies at Purdue University Calumet in Hammond, Indiana. Flannery's research has explored the emergence of a culturally specific "modern" science and its interaction with indigenous sciences around the world, particularly within the realm of food. Much of his research focuses on the indigenous cultures of Spanish-speaking America. Currently, Flannery is working on a complementary project in Veracruz, Mexico and in Northwest Indiana, which looks at the past and present interaction between indigenous and EuroAmerican cosmologies, investigating written and oral narratives related to food, agriculture and spirituality.

Diana Mincyte is a Fellow at the Rachel Carson Center at the Ludwig Maximilian University-Munich and Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of Advertising at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. As an environmental sociologist, Mincyte examines connections between subsistence and sustainability and explores topics on the interface of food, agriculture, the environment, risk society, and social inequalities. Her book investigates raw milk politics in Europe to consider how the EU's sustainable agro-food policies are impacting local semi-subsistence systems of provision and reshaping socio-economic relations in the new EU member countries. Mincyte's work was published in *Sociologia Ruralis*, *Slavic Review*, *Cultural Studies-Critical Methodologies*, *Journal of Sports and Social Issues* and a number of edited volumes.