



## Book Review

### **Food and Society: 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition**

Amy E. Guptill, Denise A. Copelton, and Betsy Lucal  
Polity Press, 2017, 250 pages

Review by Phoebe Stephens (University of Waterloo)

The breadth and diversity of food studies rules out the possibility of any one text adequately addressing all topics, but for those new to the field, a general overview of key themes is still required. This is the purpose of the second edition of *Food & Society*, the authors of which hail from the sociology departments of the State University of New York and Indiana University South Bend. This updated text is intended as an introduction to the study of food for undergraduate students, and places greater emphasis on the role of labour in the food system than does the first edition. Engagingly written, it draws from disciplines like anthropology, sociology, geography, political economy, and history to illuminate the often surprising interconnections and deep significance of food and food production in daily lives. Certainly, no topic is explored in considerable depth, necessitating broad strokes and oversimplification, but that is to be expected from an introductory text.

*Food & Society* is a well-designed pedagogical tool that should appeal to different learning styles. Each chapter opens with a case study, a powerful device for piquing the reader's interest while also setting the scene for more theoretical exploration of core themes as the chapter progresses. The "Further Readings" sections ease the way to deeper, independent study of the topic of focus and the "Further Exploration" section that closes each chapter encourages participatory learning through suggested in-class activities, discussion topics and online multimedia resources.

The book opens by introducing “foodways” and the “food system” as conceptual anchors for the study of food. These concepts are woven into the chapters that follow helping to bring cohesion to wide ranging topics. The introductory chapter also puts forward three basic principles that frame the authors’ understanding of food studies: (1) food is both rich and symbolic; (2) people’s experiences are both individual and social; and (3) foodways and food systems both reflect and shape social inequality. These principles highlight the inherent paradoxes and complexities involved in food studies. This helps to familiarize undergraduates to the ambiguities involved in interdisciplinary study more generally. In the world of complex socio-ecological systems like the food system there are very few straightforward answers, and change is to be embraced as a constant. These points are reinforced throughout the text as they are central to effectively navigating the field of food studies.

Though each chapter can be read in isolation, Guptil et al. have clearly made the effort to structure the text in such a way that the knowledge gained in earlier chapters logically feeds into the broadening scope of latter ones. The topic of the first chapter, “Food and Identity”, is well chosen, as readers can relate to the concept of how food helps to reinforce their particular identity and position in society. The chapter begins with a tale of Vegemite® and the unfriendly reception this Australian favourite received in the U.S.—to illustrate how foodways are as much shaped by culture as personal taste. While the connection between food and culture is easily observable in society, the chapter ends by exploring the less overt but equally influential role that symbolic meanings of food play. The authors maintain that social class shapes not only the nutritional quality and quantity of food available, but also taste, revealing the hidden forces at play in shaping foodways and the food system more generally.

The symbolic nature of food in defining social status and identity is further explored in the following chapters, including the ways in which the phenomenon of food as spectacle is a product of distinct features of contemporary social life and the role of marketing in influencing food choices. Of course, the factors that determine foodways are also rooted in larger political and economic structures. Chapters seven through nine delve into the power dynamics that influence how food fits into daily life. This culminates in a discussion about how unequal trade patterns originally established under colonialism persisted through the development era and into today’s globalized world. The case of Ghana’s fraught relationship with cocoa production serves as a powerful example of the entrenched, unequal dynamics involved in the global food trade.

When it comes to inequality in the food system, focusing on issues like famine, food access, and food distribution, at this stage the reader is well prepared to understand the political nature of food. Persistent inequalities are exposed as the real drivers behind food crises, an issue that is apt to fill readers with a sense of injustice and motivate them to make change. In this sense, the final chapter on alternate food movements is ideally positioned to empower readers. The parting chapter presents the notion of food democracy and its potential impacts, thus emphasizing the importance of individual agency in encouraging societal change. Here, the tension between the individual and society that is apparent throughout the whole text is addressed.

*Food & Society* has the unenviable task of choosing which topics are worthy of focus to provide for a satisfactory introduction to and overview of food studies. Despite this challenge, the book is remarkably well designed to reach and inspire its audience.

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