Vol.4 No. 2, pp. 57–60 December 2017

Canadian Food Studies La Revue canadienne des études sur l'alimentation

Book Review

Conversations in Food Studies

Colin R. Anderson, Jennifer Brady, and Charles Z. Levkoe (Editors)
University of Manitoba Press, 2016: 312 pages

Review by Wayne Roberts, PhD

This inspiring collection of essays by mostly young and freshly-minted scholars takes me back 50 years, to my own misspent youth during the 1960s and '70s, when I was part of a social history gang eager to "rewrite history from the bottom up". We wanted to ask new questions and use new methods, sources, and insights to study groups that had been unjustly ignored and marginalized, and to make what we learned available and accessible to everyday people. Although I left the university milieu to work for various social movements, and though I often wince at the grandiose and harsh accusations we made as well as the utter lack of experience and street smarts we imposed on our cause, I am proud of what that generation of labour and women's studies pioneers accomplished.

I am delighted to find this book shows signs of the same rebellious, inspired, and collaborative spirit so eager to "break on through to the other side" (*The Doors*, 1967) of food issues. I feel uplifted to think of what a new generation of scholars, activists, practitioners, and actionists will be able to accomplish over their lifetime. As philanthro-capitalist Bill Gates says, we too often overestimate what we can do over two years, but underestimate what we can do over ten. That's even more true when compared with what can be accomplished over a 30 or 40-year career. Mustafa Koc's introduction wisely advises people to buy this book as a collector's item, predicting that it will increase in value over time. Although every essay in the collection provided fresh insights for me, I will limit my comments to two of the many excellent themes in this book.

DOI: 10.15353/cfs-rcea.v4i2.244
ISSN: 2292-3071

Command performativity

Nutritionism[1]—the assumption and doctrine that food should be judged almost entirely by the nutrients it provides to humans—is, in my view, pivotal to much of what's wrong with the dominant food system in the Global North. The essay in the *Conversations* collection on *performativity*—a regrettably multisyllabic word—gives us tools to challenge dominant nutritionist assumptions, even more effectively than the multisyllabic word I have tried to popularize: *multi-functionalism*. The latter concept holds that farmers (and implicitly other food producers as well) fulfill many positive functions over and above providing low-cost food *goods* for the population—valued services such as storing carbon underground, creating scenic environments that attract tourists, supporting rural communities, and so on. This approach can reframe all aspects of food production as part of the goods and services economy, not just part of the commodity economy. The approach also reframes these positives as *positive externalities*, which governments would be silly NOT to subsidize, because the support generates so many different services at a such a low cost. This approach builds the public interest and business case for public support of a wide range of food activities that produce added and shared value.

Seeing food in terms of *performativity* does much more, and much better, when it comes to reframing the whole and wholesome food experience. It brings into view of our conscious attention all sorts of aspects that contribute to enjoying and optimizing benefits from healthy food: the music, table setting, room decoration, conviviality, sharing, toasts, and gratitude. This is what good food advocates need to work on: getting their performativity into shape, moving up in the world to foods being dressed in smart casual.

Food performativity can up our game a lot. BP (Before Performativity), public health advocates moved to educate people, assuming that learning the right thing to do would automatically lead to doing the right thing, and later to nudge people toward healthy food decisions. The nudge is designed to change behavior by changing the price, labeling, and location of good and bad foods. Both education and nudging are based on an assumption that today's eater is a direct descendant of *homo economicus*—a rational, calculating individual who needs the right environmental prod to see food decisions in their true nutritious light. But AP (After Performativity), we have a much wider palette to work with, to increase the range of goodness of food and to make it more presentable to people who might make other decisions if performativity did not yet tip the balance. The term opens a host of new opportunities for good food promoters.

[1] A word first coined by Australian scholar Gyorgy Scrinis in *Nutritionism: The Science and Politics of Dietary Advice*, Columbia University Press, 2013.

Theory is worth practicing

The second game-changing insight I got from the book came from several essays that refer to "practice theory" and "community of practice". At the Toronto Food Policy Council (2000-2010), I felt hemmed in by the expectation that the Council worked on policy, and tried to steer our everyday work towards programs. Here's the difference in a nutshell: a policy moves quickly from an unread media release to a place in the library where the dust has already been pre-prepared, while a program puts policy into action with clients, a budget, staff, a manager, and ongoing public scrutiny and political accountability.

As I interpret the essays on food waste and public education that reference practice theory, the concept of practice goes a whole step further. I see it metaphorically in terms of the time when everyone was taught to brush their teeth after every meal by brushing aggressively up and down and side to side. Only after a lot of pain and huge dental bills did we learn the right practice: brushing away from the gum to protect the gums, flossing between the teeth to get all the hidden stuff. Doing food right is a matter of the entire population learning a huge range of practices that protect us from forces that are often hidden. Practice is policy that has been converted into a program that has been converted into a practice. Practice is the highest form of theory, we used to say in the old leftie days, and who would have guessed that we would one day apply that maxim to food?

Practice is especially important for food because—unlike energy, transportation, housing, and other sectors of the economy—food mainly exists in the private realm, and cannot be fixed by government ownership or regulatory policy alone, without an active and creative role being played by the population at large. It means that good food advocates should design interventions that work at changing practices: organizing for fair trade churches, workplaces, and cities; sponsoring Meatless Mondays; offering healthy snacks at meetings; working for healthy school meals that engage students; and hosting a Slow Food convivial. Let a thousand practices bloom!

I do want to point out a few areas that are grist for the mill of subsequent work. For example, *neoliberalism* is likely the most repeated word in the book, and is almost always used as an academic cussword. The younger generation, unlike mine, has known no other world and has only breathed this hegemonically-charged air; therefore they do not always have the training to see how hegemonic it really is. Very few of the essays deal with public policy initiatives. Many of the essayists are quick to judge neoliberal food activists who neglect to honour social diversity and equity; but I saw little effort to understand the powerful constraints on civil society organizations that operate with financial insecurity—as a direct result of neoliberalism. There is also little reference to the influence of the public sphere, commons, or working people and their institutions on how food is done and performed.

I have always hoped that the Canadian food movement would ripen in the manner of its first blooming: as a co-production of lay intellectuals and civil society leaders who first brought food studies to public attention, including public health practitioners, faith activists, social entrepreneurs, and many others. Academics did not cultivate this field, and they should not own

it now, by speaking and writing in language that disenfranchises the people who gave birth to the food movement and who will be essential to its success. These are not shortcomings of the authors or editors, but they might suggest topics and projects that need to be worked on. I am patient about this, because this volume confirms that the rising generation of academic actionists is more than ready for the opportunities and challenges ahead.

Wayne Roberts is a Canadian food policy analyst, writer, and speaker. He chaired the Toronto Food Policy Council for many years, and has authored/co-authored the books Real Food for a Change and The No-Nonsense Guide to World Food. http://wayneroberts.ca