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Book Review

Serving the Public: The Good Food Revolution in Schools, Hospitals, and Prisons
By Kevin Morgan
Manchester University Press, 2025; 284 pages

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Kevin Morgan's latest book focuses on the duty of care regarding food served in public-sector settings, which is colloquially known as "the public plate". Morgan has been contributing to this vital area of food studies through his research and advocacy for many years and this book is the most recent outcome of that work. Its publication is particularly important for two interrelated reasons. First, in the age of personalized nutrition, Morgan reminds us that an individualized approach to food "fuels the neoliberal belief that access to a healthy diet is a personal and private matter at a time when it is more imperative than ever to affirm the public duty of care that governments owe their citizens, especially poor and vulnerable citizens" (p. 9). While it might be flattering to be handed a personalized nutrition program, bespoke diets will do nothing to change the food system that makes this an option.

Second, Morgan warns that we are facing a polycrisis – a situation in which multiple crises intersect and compound their effects: environmental crises (such as crop failures and water stress), human health crises (including the double burden of malnutrition in terms of undernutrition and hunger coexisting with overweight and diet-related non-communicable diseases), socio-economic crises (in terms of growing inequalities and widespread precarity) and geopolitical crises (escalating global tensions, including the recent threat of American tariffs). Food is deeply implicated in these crises and while there is growing consensus around solutions, he warns that formidable forces are

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arrayed against reform, which makes any sort of progress very slow.

Nevertheless, what Morgan calls "the good food revolution" is well underway. He describes good food as "food that is appetising, nutritious, culturally appropriate and sustainably produced" (p. 1). Sadly, such food is seldom available in public institutions such as schools, hospitals and prisons. Although pupils, patients and incarcerated individuals are very different populations, they share a commonality in that they are highly vulnerable people whose well-being depends on a nutritious diet. In these circumstances, Morgan sees food as an index of our capacity to care for ourselves and for others, whether they are closely related or not.

With this in mind, Morgan scrutinizes the public procurement of food. Overall, he finds that the "power of purchase" has been squandered by the neoliberal ethic of value for money, resulting in the lowest cost trumping palatability, healthfulness and sustainability. But when used wisely, the power of purchase can be leveraged to help fashion a fairer, healthier and more sustainable food system. The heart of the book is taken up by examples of the good food revolution, by which he means "the struggle—locally, nationally and globally—to create a fairer, healthier and more sustainable food system" (p. 17). Part of this struggle involves the fight to improve the quality of food served in three types of public institutions: schools, hospitals and prisons.

In terms of schools, Morgan focuses on two themes: the whole school approach that aims to align classroom pedagogy with food served in the dining room, and the campaign for free school meals. He explains, with numerous useful examples, how creating a school food system that is fair, healthy and sustainable has proven to be more challenging than reformers ever imagined, particularly because the complexity of the school food system was grossly underestimated. Emphasizing that sustainable school meals generate multiple dividends, he concludes with what he calls "landscapes of hope"—places that are trying to fashion sustainable school food systems in the real world—such as Malmö, Sweden, and the Universal Free School Meals movement in Scotland, Wales and some London boroughs.

With regard to hospitals, he notes that they are seen as sites for clinical treatment, not health promotion. As a result, food is a low-status afterthought. And yet, the double burden of malnutrition results in longer hospital stays and poor recovery rates, both of which are seldom factored into financial equations. In particular, he highlights what he calls the paradox of the hospital: trying to provide a clinical solution to a societal problem (i.e., diet-related diseases associated with the rapid growth of cheap, ultra-processed food). Notwithstanding these issues, he focuses on agents of change and local experiments, while warning that the real challenge lies not in attaining a standard of good food provisioning, but in retaining it in the face of personnel change and organizational upheaval.

He then moves on to prisons and the important role that food plays in the lives of incarcerated people. Here he focuses on two key themes: the carceral diet and the prospects for rehabilitation. The unhealthiness of the carceral diet has not changed for decades, in spite of research that has shown a positive relationship between an increase in nutrition and a decrease in antisocial behaviour. He also investigates the "gross food concoction" (p. 20) called the nutraloaf used in American prisons to discipline and punish prisoners. Morgan then assesses food as a vehicle for rehabilitation when he examines the food training program called the Clink. This UK charity "runs a network of gardens, kitchens and restaurants through which prisoners are trained within the prison and mentored afterwards in the community to find gainful employment, which reduces the incentive to reoffend" (p. 20).

Noting that the Good Food movement is far larger than we think, he concludes the book with two instructive messages. First, there is a tremendous appetite for reform, and change has been most successfully mobilized where civic energy and municipal activism meet to get the good food issue on the local political agenda. Second, he highlights the fragility of local food policy groups, many of which operate with scant resources and are desperately short of finance and (paid) staff. To overcome this shortcoming, he suggests they form national networks to share resources and public-social relationships with municipal governments and health boards to help generate revenue streams.

Serving the Public is a very readable book, with a lively balance of ideas and examples. It is extremely well researched and documented without ever being pedantic. As Morgan emphasizes, the power of purchase is enormous and has the potential to shift the current food system in a more fair, healthy and sustainable direction. The book is a logical companion to Joshna Maharaj's 2020 book, *Take Back the Tray: Revolutionizing Food in Hospitals, Schools, and Other Institutions*, which features a Canadian chef's perspective of the public plate.

My only criticism is the book's focus on examples from the UK and the US. I was hoping to read about some of the important work done in Canada as well (for example, FoodShare Toronto). That said, readers of *Canadian Food Studies* will be happy to see that the book is dedicated to our own Wayne Roberts and his unflagging work in the Good Food movement.

Morgan sees the good food revolution as a work in progress. The vast depth and breadth of his knowledge and experience give us a front-row seat in this quest to change the food system, which makes this book an important milestone in the development of the public plate and the field of food studies.

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