

**Paolo Corvo (2015), *Food Culture, Consumption and Society*,
London, MacMillan¹**

Review by **João Castro Santos**

University of Porto

This is a book that claims to be introductory to the field of Food Studies and not to go deeply into the matter and, indeed, that's what it does. Furthermore, it provides an overview of the status quo of food worlds, how certain problematics related to food came to be and how they can be solved. The introduction is filled with relevant information. The introduction and the latter chapters of the book are of interest for different reasons that I will clarify further ahead.

The first topic I would like to address is the meaning of eating, more specifically, eating together. According to Corvo:

To eat means to have pleasant sensations (and sometimes unpleasant), to try special emotions, to socialise with other table companions. Food is a source of energy and memory, identity and encounter, relation with the Earth and nature, a symbol of social status." Which is to say that the world of food affects all of us because every human being nourishes him- or herself and eats with other humans. Regarding the social aspect of food: "it has been said that man not only nourishes himself but he also used to eat with others, often sharing food. Eating together is an act of sociality, and it represents something original in human experience: there is no other action where people join in doing a daily and natural action. It is still unclear the reason why human beings prefer to eat together. Enjoying a meal in solitude is not considered pleasant by a large majority of individuals. Besides, cooking is considered a community action. (1)

The more valid reason seems to be that eating causes pleasant feelings and emotions we want to share with other people. Indeed, in contemporary society the time dedicated to meals has taken a decisive role in the practices of socialisation. You can see that the times people have lunch are often opportunities to establish contacts, close deals, take important decisions. Whereas dinner is the preferred situation for love affairs and friendship, or to relax after a tiring work day. Furthermore, it is stated, and quite rightfully so, that some spaces are not adequate for the consumption of food and how other very specific spaces are selected for the action of eating together such as cafeterias and living rooms.

Another essential aspect that characterises food is conviviality: eating together stimulates the appetite, and food is enjoyed much more with company. It is suggested, additionally, that people wish to share food with others more than eating it themselves. This suggests a human psychological trait in the sense that people find the sharing of food a means to achieve inner peace both physically and mentally. Food provides people with different kinds of satisfaction, which is the kind of sensation people wish to share with others. This is something that I find to be of interest, theoretically speaking, when it comes to analysing and understanding the behaviours of individuals and those of society as a whole.

The strategic importance of phenomena linked to food, in order to describe cultural identities and social dynamics is attributed to social analysts such as Lévi-Strauss, who claimed that “natural species are chosen not because they are ‘good to eat’ but because they are ‘good to think’” (12) In other words, foodstuffs, as Corvo calls them, are not good to eat because of their physical qualities but because it is socially recognised as the appropriate course of action. Food, apart from its nutritional quality, has to possess a symbolic quality.

Moreover, meals are a determining factor when it comes to establishing power systems and social relations; and it helps the individual to be defined and to belong to a particular social group; those who do not follow the established rules are considered to be outside of the system/community. The cuisine can, thus, be seen as a medium, a specific kind of language.

Additionally, the author of the book intends to understand the social meaning of food today and its relations with other cultural products, to define and interpret the practices of food consumption. A point of interest for the author and for Food Studies in general is how the table can define or highlight social differences of both status and role. Of course, since Food Studies often concern very delicate topics – which can go from political democracy to issues such as economics, social and economic justice, welfare, and quality of life – it is, according to Corvo, difficult not to consider such social differences and dimensions of society which concern the daily life of people. Food problems are full of social and political implications, both at the local and the global level. For example, social phenomena are usually contradictory: if some confirm the centrality assumed by food due to the fame achieved by chefs and the spread of cooking schools, others seem to indicate a different “reality”, such as the decrease of food consumption and the decrease of time spent cooking. Nevertheless, a point of consensus seems to be that food is a key element in shaping both the physical and psychological transformations of the world at large.

Food is seen as a system of symbolic mediation by which a person interprets and constructs reality. According to authors such as Lupton it is a language that legitimizes the social significance which forms the basis for the construction of reality. In other words, it seems to establish some form of mediation between the individual and other individuals or with notions of society as a whole. Nevertheless, food, in addition to this cognitive dimension, has also a regulative dimension. Food consumption takes place in a precise manner and in a precise place, which represents the core elements of this language.

The following topic of discussion and still related to food dynamics is that of the identity of food itself: with respect to the concept of food as a key factor in maintaining ethnic identity, Goody argues that no national or regional cuisine was or is free from contamination, but it is instead the result of interactions between different social and cultural levels, between private and public spheres, between local and foreign. What is being stated here is that food doesn't possess a singular identity and is no longer related to a single country, in this case, the country in which the food originated. It is suggested that, through the ages, and due to globalisation, several kinds of food that are considered natural

to a single country (like sushi is known as a food from Japan, for example) has acquired a hybrid identity and belongs to any country that adopts its production, cooking and consumption. The issue of this hybrid identity can also be seen as a key factor in connecting not only people from one country, but also people from across countries, which makes the statement of a hybrid identity a valid one.

Goody, an author Corvo discusses in detail, also provides in advance the future development of the food system, with the diffusion of a flexible food and fusion in society, which becomes multi-ethnic. This is to say that food, once it is appropriated by other countries in their restaurant menus, for example, acquires a multi-layered identity and does not belong to one single country anymore, implying a certain loss of originality. According to Corvo, the only cuisine original of a country that can be defined worthy of the name is, therefore, not the national but rather the regional one, because it has territorial roots that allow it to be known by most of the local population and never outside of that particular space. Each new food is incorporated in the food system through an authentication process that makes it local and genuine, as happens to a foreign word that progressively is accepted into our language.

Another important topic for food anthropologists, which is related to the transformation of food identity, is the relationship between food and memory. Holtzman, another author quoted by Corvo, considers food a fundamental key to the investigation of the more complicated aspects of memory. He considers food a cultural product determined both historically and locally. Furthermore, food is remembered because it is not only nourishment, but it has cognitive, social and psychological importance as discussed above and, thus, giving validity to the statements provided by Goody. Our daily lives are intrinsically connected to lifestyles, cultural models, political and economic processes through food. Another Food Studies author, Warren Belasco, emphasizes, once again, the concept of food as a source of identity and social differentiation.

The subsequent chapters of the book are more devoted to some of the problematics related to food such as, money and social inequalities and all past events that have brought economics and the imbalance of food distribution to the condition it currently faces. Some

of the examples are: natural disasters; diseases related to food such as anorexia, bulimia and obesity; the unfairness of corporations; or the lack of support of agriculture. An aspect I find worthy of consideration is related to the reasons for malnutrition: in most cases, contrary to common belief, this is not related to lack of food but to poverty that doesn't allow the proper purchase of the foodstuff necessary for survival. This also helps to explain why food waste is so rampant throughout the world. As stated by Corvo, the rights of individuals and societies around the world are sacrificed for the sake of profit making, which means that a real food democracy is missing, a context where ecology should be more valued than economy. There are several appeals regarding the respect towards the environment and the principles of social justice.

To conclude, this book is an important contribution to the field of Food Studies as a whole and a perfect introductory tool for any young researcher who is willing to begin his/her research on food in academia, as well as a useful guide for senior academics. This book provides important guidelines for the assessment of both human physicality and psychology. Furthermore, it presents a survey of food distribution and evolution in a way that is precise and direct. In short, the book is of extreme relevance for the field of Food Studies and many other areas, such as History, Sociology or Psychology.

NOTE

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