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Why now?

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The sociology of food and eating has recently re-emerged as an issue, not only within health sociology where concerns with healthy eating have come to the fore, but also in relation to emerging food markets, identity and food consumption, a renewed interest in food governance and diminishing trust in the food supply (McMillan and Coveney, 2010). Whether the concerns are about lack of food, too much food, the quality and/or safety of food, how/what to feed family/children, or the symbolic meanings attached to different types of foods, the central issue is that we all, as human beings, have to eat in order to survive. The core question for sociologists is around the generative mechanisms underpinning these questions and issues. Indeed, the degree of interest in the sociology of food is evidenced by the level of response to this Special Issue on the Sociology of Food and Eating, with nearly 60 abstracts being submitted.

There are a number of social factors which have contributed to the resurgence of interest in the sociology of food and eating at this juncture. The globalization of the food supply and increasing access to information has contributed to increased risk consciousness with regards to food, with recent scares dominating news media (Knight et al., 2007). In Australia there has been a significant increase in consumer concern about food safety stemming from media coverage of stories about food safety resulting in growing concerns about the use of pesticides, food additives and preservatives (FSANZ, 2008; Williams et al., 2004). In addition, the food supply in Australia is changing. Australia is rapidly becoming a significant food importer with imported food reaching a record $8 billion in 2009 (Food Policy Section, 2009: 11). Many imported foods are staples, like fruits and vegetables, meat and cereal products, raising questions about Australia’s ability to be food secure.
Insecurities and anxieties about the food system are further exacerbated by the emergence of new food technologies, which mirrors debates in sociology about ontological insecurities (Giddens, 1990) and cultures of anxiety (Crawford, 2004). European research has long reported concerns with food technologies, such as GM foods, which have been less evident in an Australian context (Lupton, 2005). Recent changes such as the lifting of a moratorium on GM canola crops in New South Wales and Victoria have the potential to increase concerns with safety of the food supply.

Globalization is also a factor in rising food costs and food insecurity. Growing demand fuelled by rising populations (Stoeckel, 2008) and increased consumer expectations and consumer demands (ODI, 2008); alongside diminishing food supplies attributed to poor harvests in export countries (ODI, 2008), increasing farming production costs (Stoeckel, 2008) and the use of crops to produce biofuels (Dornboech and Steenblik, 2007) have all contributed to rising food costs. Food cost plays a significant role in mediating food choice, particularly among low income people (Harrison et al., 2007), who often have to cut back on food spending to allow for other essentials such as housing and utilities (Dowler, 2008), contributing in turn, to poorer health.

Health concerns also underpin an increasing focus upon prevention of chronic disease through adoption of healthy lifestyles. In the food arena, concerns with the prevention of chronic disease are most commonly associated with obesity. A number of authors (Boero, 2007; Lawrence, 2004; Mitchell and McTigue, 2007) point to the construction of obesity as an ‘epidemic’ with long term health and economic ramifications. As a consequence, 30 million dollars were allocated for obesity-related research in Australia between 2005 and 2009 (Maher et al., 2010). Guthman and DuPuis (2006) associate the emergence of concerns with obesity at this point with a tension between models of personhood which encourage consumerism and those which encourage self-discipline. Obesity is constructed as a ‘problem’ requiring both self-appraisal and governance, creating fertile ground for the emergence of a variety of commercial weight loss programs and public health initiatives (Guthman and DuPuis, 2006). The designation of obesity as a risk factor for chronic illness creates a social imperative for self management while designation as an epidemic leads to vigilance as obesity is an issue for which we are all, as individuals, ‘at risk’ (Boero, 2007).

A final consideration is the impact of ethical concerns upon food production, consumption and transport. Ethical consumption of food centres on localism, as a means of promoting environmental sustainability and social justice through reducing ‘food miles’ and the creation of alternate food networks (DuPuis and Goodman, 2005). It provides a venue for the construction of identity through food choice with that choice providing a mark of membership of cultural groups (Fischler, 1988). Soper (2007) associates ethical consumption with the acquisition of status. The purchasing
of organic and local food may reflect a form of asceticism in which distinction is marked by restraint, not only in type of food consumed but also in the amount consumed (Guthman, 2002), leading Soper (2007: 210) to suggest that ethical food consumers may be more ‘obedient to “consumerist” rather than “citizenly” urges’.

This issue of the *Journal of Sociology* brings a sociological lens to emerging issues in relation to food and eating. The papers in this issue explore concerns with globalization; emerging food risks; the individualization of responsibility for health; asceticism and cultural identity; and the experiences of dieticians of their professional practice. The theoretical perspectives adopted include feminist theories, governmentality (and critiques of neoliberalism), consumerism, theories of trust and risk including reflexive modernization, and conventions theory.

Buchler, Smith and Lawrence address issues of risk and perceptions of food safety through survey research with Australian participants. They distinguish between ‘modern risks’, such as food additives which have emerged as part of modernity and which are unpredictable and unavoidable, and ‘traditional risks’ such as food contamination, which are more amenable to the actions of the individual. They identify a greater concern with modern than traditional food risks, most notably among women and older respondents, which, following Beck (1992), they associate with the uncertainty of these risks. The individualization of risk management is addressed through identification of groups who have greater confidence in their capacity to manage food risks. The extent to which people on lower incomes and with less education express concerns about traditional risks leads the authors to challenge food policies that promote consumer sovereignty.

Zivokic, Warin, Davies and Moore also explore the individualization of risk. They argue that the positioning of children in the childhood obesity debate enables a moral and legal discourse in which mothers are held accountable for childhood obesity. They demonstrate, through analysis of media that children are often presented as the victims of poor parenting enabling a discourse of parental, and in particular, maternal responsibility for overweight and obese children. This is furthered by policies which promote what Giddens calls the ‘colonization of the future’ (1991: 111) in which public policy invests in the health and well-being of children to meet the responsibilities of future citizenship but also by ideologies of motherhood which promote selfless and labour-intensive mothering.

Mah also highlights the individualization of public health through analysis of food policy in Japan. She undertakes an analysis of *shokuiku* or ‘nurturing through food’, a policy framework which promotes public health through dietary change. Mah argues that *shokuiku* not only individualizes responsibility for public health but also promotes Japanese produce through associating healthy eating with a traditional Japanese diet. Drawing upon Japanese cultural imagery and culinary history, *shokuiku*
has become a domestic and international marketing strategy but also a marker of Japanese identity, leading to the association of food choice with citizenship. The good citizen is personally responsible for their health but also patriotic in their food choices.

Isaacs, Dixon, Banwell, Seubsman, Kelly and Pangsap also explore consumption issues in an Asian context. They use ethnographic methods to highlight how the incursion of supermarkets into Thailand has resulted in the remaking of both supermarkets and fresh food markets. Convention theory is utilized to identify how localized social and relational norms and values respond to changes in social context. For supermarkets this is reflected in the adoption and adaption of features of local market culture such as the observance of religious festivals and rewards for customer loyalty, while for local markets it results in greater standardization and improved hygiene strategies.

The final paper, by Gingras, takes a divergent approach to the sociology of food through exploring the working experiences of practicing dieticians. The author argues for a disjunction between the professional expectations and practical experiences of practicing dieticians which contributes, in turn, to professional melancholia. Melancholia arises from an educational background which focuses upon positivist knowledge; from the relative impotence of dietetic practice to change dietary habits and from professional power relations within the health care system. Her participants argue for the promotion of, and take satisfaction from the relational aspects of, their work, and view the teaching of sociological and psychological knowledge as an important adjunct to dietetic education.

References


