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CONTEMPORARY FOOD MATTERS?: A REVIEW ESSAY

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Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life by *Barbara Kingsolver* (with Steven L. Hopp and Camille Kingsolver), 2007, New York: Harper Perennial, 370pp, £XX.XX Paperback, ISBN 978-0-06-085255-9; **Stuffed and Starved: From Farm to Fork, the Hidden Battle for the World Food System** by *Raj Patel*, 2007, London: Portobello Books Ltd, 438pp, £XX.XX Paperback, ISBN 978-1-84627-011-6; **The End of Food: The Coming Crisis in the World Food Industry** by *Paul Roberts*, 2008, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 390pp, £XX.XX Paperback, ISBN: 978-0-7475-8881-8

In a contemporary era defined by growing unemployment, armed conflict, corporate malfeasance (and welfare) and a worsening climate, three recent books have come along to remind us that food still very much matters. Indeed, at some point or another, all three situate the food system—and specifically that behemoth of the industrial food system—as contributing to and/or causing these maladies that are stalking various unfortunate parts of the globe. The heart of the matter for these authors, one a popular novelist (Kingsolver), the other two an academic/activist (Patel) and an investigative journalist (Roberts), is that food has been turned into just another commodity to be bought and sold on what are now purposefully globalised, untraceable markets. Intimately related to this, they argue, we no longer have any semblance of control over how the food system is structured nor any say about the recombined, additive-ridden stuff that passes for the food-like substances that keep us on the go. Rather, we are only served up items that make a tidy profit or add to the portfolios of food multinationals, supermarkets and fast food joints all of whom have an unstoppable stranglehold on how food is grown, produced and eaten.

Wider socio-economic changes make an appearance here: corporate-friendly, neoliberal governance structures have combined with the movement of women into the workplace and the growing marketing savvy of food corporations to saddle us with highly processed, value-added convenience foods that have now infected our taste buds and lifestyles all the way down. We want our food, we want it ten minutes ago and we want it tasty and easy to prepare (if at all) and corporations are very good at getting us to pine for our food this way. Thus, consumer power—while at the same time potentially marshalled to get us ‘outside’ of this industrial, corporate controlled food system—is merely a ruse that has us choosing different (looking) goods from the same corporate menu, ‘industrial’ organic foods now included as the *soup du jour* to be critiqued alongside the rest of the food system. In short, according to these authors, the Rice Infusion, Cheese and Onion Pringles® (they *are* ‘naturally lower in fat’ and taste *damn* good, thank you very much) I bought at my corner store are empty of any and all ‘real’ nutrition, food culture and socio-ecological relations, but full of social and economic inequalities, marketing wherewithal, years of embedded food science and investment and, of course, profits and power for, in this case, Proctor and Gamble, the home chemical company.

Much of what is in these books reworks the fertile ground that has been well-prepared and -tended by critical academics and activists nigh on 20 years now; this work is listed in their relatively healthy reference sections or noted throughout. There are echoes of a number of key scholars from Goodman et al (1987) and Magdoff et al’s (2000) treatises on capitalist agriculture, to Nestle’s (2002, 2003) work on food risk and nutrition, to Guthman’s (2004) critique of the organic foods industry, the later hopefully getting the justifiable credit she feels she (and we) are due (cf. Guthman, 2007). Moreover, these three books need to be situated alongside more contemporary popular media engaged in numerous discussions about food, from the meteoric rise of celebrity chefs and their media/publishing empires, to other books targeted at similar audiences such as *Fast Food Nation* (Schlosser, 2001), *Diet for a*

Dead Planet (Cook, 2006) *So Shall We Reap* (Tudge, 2004), *the Unhealthy Truth* (2009) and *Breadline USA* (2009) to the recent spate of food-oriented documentaries and exposes (e.g. *Super Size Me!* and *Food, Inc*), to alternative food's growing online presence (e.g. www.lavidalocavore.org/).

Yet, what is useful in these volumes—particularly *Stuffed and Starved* and *The End of Food*—is that they not only summarise much of the earlier scholarly critiques but that they do so by bringing us empirically up to date and by expanding on the topic of the corporate control of food through some very communicable prose. These are then, not sensationalist accounts that work through 'shock and awe' but rather they desire to methodically explore the sophisticated and often disparate 'standards operating procedures' of the capitalist food system and what happens when food is commodified and left to captured, oligopolistic markets. Kingsolver is slightly more sensationalist, primarily because *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* is constructed as a food 'memoir' that describes in personal detail the trials and tribulations of her family's attempt to grow their own food and/or live on locally sourced foods for a year. These reflections on gardening and making food are interspersed with critiques of various parts of the industrial food system and (the requisite) recipes that she and her family have developed to eat the stuff they grow.

Another useful aspect to these books is that they give us a sense of what these authors propose we do about the state of our food. To me, all three are seemingly rather fatalistic about reforming the current food system, most likely given Patel's and Robert's sustained attempts at critique and Kingsolver's project to live out an 'alternative' food economy. Instead we are provided suggestions to work 'outside' the corporate-dominated system as ways to regain control and power in what we might put into our bodies, what farmers might grow and how economies might be organised and oriented. Not all that surprisingly and given that we are now in post-organic times, Slow Food and local food figure quite predominantly across all three, with Kingsolver providing an almost real-time testament to local foods and the radical potentials of home cooking. Yet, hearteningly, much more is offered up, especially by Patel and Roberts. At various times, they discuss the fundamental need for collective organisation and, indeed, political movements by consumers and producers, the need to alter and develop new relationships around food provisioning, enjoyment and eating, and the need for a healthy suspect of consumerist-oriented politics. Indeed, it was particularly refreshing to see one of Patel's ten suggested changes to the food system as the need for a living wage in order to facilitate better access to more and healthier foods; this flies in the face of the current shouts of 'just buy local!' and 'we need to be paying the real cost of food anyway!' that many activists deploy and that Kingsolver comes problematically close to endorsing.

Perhaps, in taking a cue from Patel and (more or less) Roberts, this might come to define what the post-organic era could be about—an era that should have surely learned its lessons from the rapid corporate colonisation of organic food markets and movements and the limits to (organic) consumer politics. Here, a seemingly less 'anaemic' (cf. Guthman, 2007) and more robust food movement politics might be on offer and potentially scaled up. Alternatives designed to regain control over food can work to focus on oppositional politics and policy as much or even more than they do about 'feeding in the niche', taste, consumer choice and exclusivity. It is getting these things beyond the level of political discourse—albeit even popular ones which is where all three authors basically leave us—and into the realms of 'real', material politics which is where the really hard work beyond shopping and reading begins.

The End of Food is an engaging read; it builds on the journalistic tools of grounded, detailed stories that then spiral up nicely into more general explorations of the conventional food system and its ability to create profits and affect our everyday lives. For instance, Roberts crafts compelling tales around, among other things, the *E.coli* outbreak in spinach from California's Salinas Valley, the historical discovery and application of antibiotics in livestock, the engineering of low-fat ice cream by Nestle for 'mouthfeel', to the tenuous situation of a family of poor maize farmers in Kenya. He is concerned with uncovering the economics of the food system—and most importantly its corporate, market-based control—which he argues is at the centre of the 'coming crisis in the world food industry': too much food produced and consumed too cheaply and at, paradoxically, too much cost to people through obesity, illness and/or hunger and too much cost to the environment through land degradation and the potential complications of genetically modified foods. It is these costs in addition to growing populations, growing meat consumption and the looming end to the petroleum era he labels as the coming crisis, much of which is already upon us. All of this is argued in blistering detail across the various chapters which tackle one of his most urgent, overarching points: 'food, unlike nearly all other commodities, cannot be replaced'.

Part one of the book begins with a short history of human food systems up to the origins and spread of the industrial system, moves to a description of the materialities of corporate control of the 'value-added' food making process—one of the most powerful and striking parts of the book—continues by describing the rise of retail capital and the impact of the 'low-cost, high-volume' model that 'changed food itself' and ends with a chapter on the effects of processed foods on human health. Part two of the book is concerned with the paradoxes of the global food trade: pernicious competition amongst agro-food capitals, persistent hunger in poorer countries, the possibilities for global food-based disease outbreaks, and the environmental problematics of meat-based diets and chemically-intensive farming systems. Part three, in which Roberts talks through and is ultimately quite critical of the various solutions of genetic engineering and organic foods, is arguably the weakest part of the book; it is overly diffuse, confusing in some parts and seemingly silly in others (we need a fish-based, Blue Revolution!) and, finally, too rushed to give us anything more satisfying than the suggestion that we 'need to take back control of [our] food'. Yet, this book works as critique and seems to work well even if one of his main targets, that of markets, is slightly misplaced. I would have liked it better if he would have named names a bit more readily and laid the critique at the specific feet of corporate-dominated monopolistic capitalism and State-enabled weak regulatory regimes rather than hiding behind the generics of the 'market' and the 'economy'; perhaps this was too much for what is probably more of an American-based audience for the book. Still, it is nice to see that with *The End of Food* and *Stuffed and Starved*, 'doing' various and complex slices of the political economy of food is not dead but that it has merely bubbled up in more popular arenas.

Stuffed and Starved, which is decidedly more global in scope, engages with some very similar territory to *The End of Food* but through a narrower prism. Patel's remit, given the title of the book, is to work through an exploration of how 'global hunger and obesity are symptoms of the same problem'. As he puts it 'guided by the profit motive, the corporations that sell our food shape and constrain how we eat, and how we think about food'. In discharging his remit, he desires to take us inside the very neat conceptual and visual device of the 'hourglass' which he uses to show how a very few corporate players control the bottle neck in the middle of this hourglass as food moves from the much wider and vaster ends populated by producers and consumers. This control is explored in the book's chapters through its set of nefarious

means and effects such as the illusion of 'choice', farmer suicides, debt, international food trade regimes and the rise of agri-business corporations, American food aid, farm chemicals and GM crops, farming and food subsidies, the growth of supermarket retail power and, finally, the linked relationships among food advertising, processed foods, deteriorating health and obesity. The outcomes of all of this have resulted in India becoming one of the world's highest concentrations of diabetics through the introduction of processed foods and drinks, while food security continues to erode for millions in the US at the same time it has one of the most obese populations on the planet. One of the most striking representations of the corporate control of the global food systems is the bloody corpse of Lee Kyung Hae, the Korean farmer/organiser who committed suicide with a penknife after shouting 'the WTO kills farmers!' in Cancun. Used to full effect throughout the book, Patel ties his tragic death to the crushing debt farmers experience as a result of captured international food markets, weak regulatory regimes and the constantly fluctuating and falling prices for food; most importantly though, Patel deploys Hae's suicide as a way to suggest that the current structures of the food system work to deal out death, disease and illness as much as they do tasty hamburgers sold by smiling clowns.

What does *Stuffed and Starved* argue needs to be done then? The key for Patel is the need for freedom *from* the control of the corporations sitting atop the food system through freedom *to* choose other foods as well as other food imaginaries and structures. But this is not just the simple freedom to buy fair trade, healthy and/or local over conventional, although there is a little of that for 'us' as readers to do as a bit part to wider changes. Rather, freedom here derives from collective action—the Landless Peoples' Movement in Brazil is given as an example—community organising like that done by the People's Grocery in Oakland, California and 'food sovereignty', a principle coming out of a rights-based approach to food access. The discussion of the latter, a new buzzword circulating in development work and associated with Via Campesina, makes several short tantalizing appearances but quickly disappears into the clouds of critique and/or the pointed suggestions for change at the end of the book. For me, this was a well-written and captivating book that does the Herculean job of tracking down and connecting the dots of the impacts of the current food system. In addition it also provides a kind of 'food manifesto' that is actually less about food and more about asserting our rights as citizens in the pursuit of social justice rather than locally grown, organic arugula. In this, swallowing Patel's arguments becomes not just tasty but overtly restorative.

Animal, Vegetable, Miracle, to put it mildly, is a completely different animal. This is a reflective personal story of the Kingsolver family's move from Arizona (there is no 'local' food there!) to a farmstead in southern Appalachia where the author grew up. Chapters chronicle their year of local 'food life' across the seasons and their trials and tribulations marked in sometimes excruciating detail, especially the tales about asparagus, tomatoes and chickens/turkeys. All of this is interspersed with reflective essays by Kingsolver's eldest daughter, lists of their favourite recipes and industrial food system exposes penned by her partner, a lecturer in environmental studies. On the whole, though, she seems much less concerned about the concentration and control of the food supply by corporate players and more concerned with the concentrations of vinegar to milk in making home-made cheese and the concentrations of farmers in her local foodshed available to sell her enough food to get by.

The book presents a pretty worrying (a)politics of taste, that, for a personal reflection, is almost totally unreflective about her personal situatedness versus that of others in the food

system; indeed, no ink is spilt on nor sympathy marshalled for her ‘other’ regional neighbours (except for small organic farmers of course) who most likely make up some of the poorest and most food insecure populations in the US. Engaging with the politics of food access was apparently overcome by trips to the local farmers’ market and mountains of heirloom tomatoes. One of the chief arguments in the book for why the food system is where it is in the US is also one of its most bizarre: Kingsolver states that the US has absolutely *no* food culture of its own and, among other things, this causes people to be obese. Besides being a complete impossibility, this smacks of a total and utter disregard for engaging with, exploring and understanding what the current food culture *might actually be* and how it and its socialisation might be affecting people, food and farming. The un-stated argument that people need to either simply close their mouths and/or choose healthy foods gets a dangerously troubling airing here. Moreover, given that she spends 370 pages talking about *her own* and *her family’s* food culture—a further unreflective aspect of this book—and that of European (slow) food culture, we are apparently supposed to shift to these ways of eating without a second thought. Indeed, European food culture is lionised throughout the narrative, with images being conjured up of fresh, healthy food falling from the Old World sky onto the (smaller) plates of trim, happy eaters; the fact that ‘nude beaches are still popular in Europe’ is supposed to be a clarion call to Americans to eat less and differently, emulating the French and Italians all the way to no bathing suit. One look at the UK’s increasing rates of obesity or the absolute control of the food supply by retail capital across much of Europe might have toned down Kingsolver’s rhetoric just a bit.

What to make of this book, then? First, while food does still matter, with Kingsolver’s narrative and overt politics, it matters in some troubling and problematic ways worthy of continuing engagement and systematic critique rather than dismissal (again, cf. Guthman, 2007). Second, she does provide us a few points of light hiding in the shadows of the absurdities about food culture generally and the assumptions about European food culture in particular. After all, a mention of Marx is at least sandwiched between the alternative food movement illuminati of Alice Waters and Wendell Berry. One personal take-away for me that I have actually started to institute in my household is the suggestion to make Fridays a night to make homemade foods with my children. I am under no illusion, however, (unlike Kingsolver) that I am in a particularly privileged socio-economic position to be able to do this, and I have found that it makes educational and food-choice sense for my family. Finally, that I took to one of her suggestions so easily—as opposed to writing my MP about creating a more socially just food policy or starting, say, a consumer cooperative—shows that her kind of food politics are perhaps *too* easy; the key question raised here, then, is that if we start the recipe for changes to the food system in the spaces of the kitchen, how do we work to do it in a manner that reaches those most in need and confronts those most in power? It is in asking and exploring this timely question that Kingsolver fundamentally fails but where Roberts and, more fully, Patel might begin to take us.

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