Handbook of Food and Anthropology: afterword

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THE HANDBOOK OF FOOD AND ANTHROPOLOGY

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Edited by
Jakob A. Klein and James L. Watson

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To the memory of Sidney W. Mintz (1922–2015) and Jack Goody (1919–2015), two pioneers in the field

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Afterword

CRISTINA GRASSENI

As a cultural anthropologist who has worked in one way or another on food since my PhD research, I greatly appreciated Jakob Klein and James Watson's selections of themes and topics for this *Handbook of Food and Anthropology*. Anthropologists deal with food on diverse premises and with several foci: individual and collective identity-making, nutrition, the economic infrastructure and political agency of food systems, as well as the crucial fieldwork interactions with food's symbolically and relationally charged routines and tacit etiquettes.

Some of us do fieldwork with collective or individual social actors who practise 'alternatives' striving for more sustainable forms of food production, distribution and consumption; some collaborate with government or corporate actors. Inspired by international movements and networks for alternative agriculture (e.g. *Via Campesina*, *Urgenci*, and RIPESS – *Réseau international des Partenariats locaux et solidaires entre producteurs et consommateurs*), some food consumers and growers practise deliberate forms of food provisioning that might re-engineer food chains and reinvent collective forms of food procurement (Grasseni 2013). International networks of food activists increasingly strive to put themselves on the geopolitical map and to establish strategies and alliances at a global level to lobby governments and intergovernmental agencies for favourable policies.

Methodologically, anthropologists increasingly are inspired by interdisciplinary, multimedia, and multi-sensory forms of engagement with ethnographic fieldwork and scholarly production. Just as networks of food activists are active online through social media, anthropologists might choose interactive documentaries or open-ended fora to represent or participate in the activities of key social actors. This, of course, leads us to the ethical implications of doing research with and on food. These implications, which include how to go about non-disclosure agreements, industrial and commercial power relations, as well as cultural sensitivities in food research, are squarely confronted in this *Handbook* in Chapter 20 by Melissa L. Caldwell on 'Moving food studies from the classroom to the boardroom', but they deserve much more attention.

The chapters by Melissa L. Caldwell and Johan Pottier challenge us to articulate what the ultimate goal of the anthropological study of food will or should be. Is it just observing research participants to represent the cultural diversity of food systems as fairly as we can? Is it to also voice our beliefs as to how current food systems could or should be bettered? Is it to share our expertise with social actors? And if so, *which* social actors, *which* stakeholders? Is it to advise policy, elucidating which social practices work best to then facilitate them? As practising anthropologists

know, these goals might actually shift over time: beginning with just 'obtaining information', to then wishing to elucidate what works best and why.

However, it is difficult to implement anthropological expertise by way of policy. Bottom-up networks and actors sometimes work in ways that are antagonistic to state-directed or corporate-driven agendas. Corporations ultimately are concerned with profit, so on what grounds might we think that we are building a better world by working alongside them? Or are we too comfortable preaching to the converted in our mission to give voice to the underdog? Is the deconstruction of authenticity a sufficient goal in our critical approach to food heritage? Or should we study what the (certainly 'imagined') traditional qualities of place-based foods actually do, in their everyday discursive, symbolic, and material work of evoking community, belonging, and meaning for both eaters and producers (Grasseni 2017; see the chapters by West and Avieli in this volume)? And how is this work achieved and performed in diverse socio-historical contexts, such as those of post-socialist transitions (see Jung in this volume and Jung, Klein and Caldwell 2014)? How are 'solidarity' and 'skill' constructed and mobilized to create and assign 'trust' and 'quality' to food (see Paxson, this volume)? While these are some of the dilemmas and interrogations we face, the impact of our research is another point to discuss: would stakeholders of whatever kind want to learn from our case studies approach? Further, what do we have to gain as scholars from coproducing our intellectual agendas with stakeholders? How, for example, would this lead to conceptual advancements in anthropological theory?

Anthropologists offer to shed new light onto known phenomena. Rather than treating these phenomena in isolation, anthropologists situate them in complex contexts and view them from multiple perspectives. For example, from Maris Gillette's chapter we learn about the diversity and divergence of interpretations and practices of 'halal' food, which is differently and variously appropriated and interpreted across regions and cultures. Similarly, each of the twenty chapters in this volume illustrate multiple and important facets of food in anthropology: religious foodways, community building through food, food safety, rural and urban food insecurity, food agency among specific groups such as migrants and food politics for specific age groups such as (school) children, (local) skill and knowledge transmission in cooking, large distribution and artisanal production, corporate and ethical approaches to food consumption.

Many food-related topics are analysed not only by anthropologists, but also by scholars in other disciplines, from human geography to the sociology of consumption, to rural and urban studies, planning and policy studies. These scholars often do not share the same conceptual framework or the same methodological premises as anthropologists. What is then the added value of our anthropological knowledge of food and foodways? The aim of anthropological research is not to identify one successful model among a variety of practices or food systems, to then implement it at scale. Rather, ethnographies of food are characterized by their explorative and holistic character. They first analyse how each procurement circuit, sharing network, or cooking technique works and speaks to its own context, and then proceed to develop a conceptual framework of wider relevance.

In this vein, ethnographies of food could contribute to the understanding and development of shorter-chain food systems. In the last decade, and especially in response to the economic crisis of 2008, grassroots networks have articulated models and strategies for such systems. Several models are growing in advanced capitalist countries. These range from so-called solidarity economy networks to the French *associations pour le maintien d'une agriculture paysanne* (Dubuisson-Quellier, Lamine and Le Velly 2011) and include various local instantiations of globalizing movements, such as the 'de-growth' or the Transition movement. Some of these networks constitute successful models in their own regions and according to their own rationales, but often do not speak to or compare themselves to others. Comparing these forms of food activism on the basis of ethnographic knowledge would allow us to see if and how these networks and practices are innovative or resilient. For example, we can see how networked consumers speak to their own needs (to procure food in a more sustainable and participated way) but also shape collective forms of procurement as instantiations of broader social, economic, and political movements. Thus, ethnographic case studies can not only appreciate local phenomena but also gain a detailed insight into patterns and processes that take place on a broader scale.

For anthropologists, this may mean going beyond the study of 'food security' and tapping into discourses and practices of 'food sovereignty' (Trauger 2015) and 'food justice' (Alkon and Agyeman 2011), not only in the developing world *but also* in the so-called developed world, particularly within the context of austerity and its neoliberal workings in a globalized food system. The politics of food systems are being critically investigated, for example with increased awareness of 'food deserts' (Gottlieb and Joshi 2013, 39–58) and of the manifold but ambivalent promises of 'urban agriculture' (Pottier, in this volume). It is pertinent therefore to ask how collective action may or may not achieve a transformation of food systems, while in the same breath it interacts with profoundly rooted cultural premises about the significance of food, and with locally defined forms of participation and belonging through food. Solidarity, for example, is locally articulated while transnationally practised in 'solidarity economy networks'. But it is also increasingly invoked, by right-wing activists as much as left-wing ones, through practices of food distribution and alleviation of the consequences of austerity economics, for example in Greece (Rakopoulos 2014).

Ways of eating, sharing, procuring, cooking, growing, gathering, connecting, and protesting with and through food are of course socially inculcated, learnt, and apprenticed. They are the prime locus of 'cultural intimacy' and of potential 'gastro-essentialism', as Michael Herzfeld reminds us in Chapter 1 of this volume. Yet how do we negotiate between apprenticeship and standards when it comes to foodways? David Sutton (in this volume) focuses on the local, familiar, intimate development of certain culinary skills, which inevitably are performed as an aesthetic and moral way of doing that is pitched against the cosmopolitan orthodoxy of the cutting board and of televised international chefs. Skill (namely practical and organizational know-how about growing, processing, storing, cooking, consuming, tasting, praising, bartering, etc.) may nurture networks of mutual help. However, it is to the unobvious and situated interactions of the global and local dimensions of food systems that several

chapters in this *Handbook* alert us (e.g. Hull's chapter in this volume). Scale is at work when smallholders are forced to negotiate adversary conditions in procurement contracts to large distribution networks such as supermarket chains. Scale works its ways in the legalized persecution of seed savers who nevertheless retrench, network, and resist, as recent ethnography on the practice of saving and exchanging locally adapted seeds has shown (Da Via 2015).

Seed-saving networks are one among the various forms of collective food procurement, not only in urban but also in rural areas of Europe, bringing together family farmers, cooperatives, and NGOs (Demeulenaere 2014). This 'new food activism' requires moving beyond 'foodie' types of engagement with a politics of consumption that does not sufficiently challenge the premises of racial and class inequality or of global displacements (Alkon and Guthman 2017; see also Abbots' chapter on migrants' food practices and Luetchford's on ethical consumption, both in this volume). Initiatives for local food provisioning are proliferating and are sometimes identified as symptoms of a global social movement striving for a 'new', 'solidarity', 'civic', or 'community' economy. Anthropological scholarship on provisioning activism has highlighted how alternative food networks often focus on sustainability and quality, less on social inclusion and 'food justice' (namely actual access to resources by unprivileged groups, see for example Mares 2014; and Luetchford in this volume). Further, we lack empirical evidence and a coherent conceptual framework of how 'civic food networks' (Lamine, Darolt and Brandenburg 2012) may move *beyond* local food. What are their limits and potentials? Several networks are growing transnationally, often without reciprocal knowledge or coordination. How do these initiatives develop transnationally beyond informal and small-scale arrangements? Why do they often fail and what makes them successful? How do they use 'reskilling' to promote a more inclusive economy and resilient society? A 'warrior/builder/weaver' classification of diverse modes of provisioning activism (Stevenson et al. 2008) can allow us to theorize these complex and diverse forms of critical engagements with the food system: focusing on social innovation through *building* local economic circuits and *weaving* alliances among networks, or on repertoires of social contestation.

In sum, this *Handbook* covers the cultural, ecological, socio-economic, and political facets of local and global relations in the current food system. I suggest that a further focus on food sustainability, grassroots innovation, and food sovereignty might add important developments for the current age. For example, critical investigations unveil the subtle ways in which neoliberal economies create subjects who embrace wholeheartedly the underlying philosophy of commodifying and financializing anything worth surplus extraction and value accumulation, while outsourcing and enrolling service provision under the agendas of charitable giving, active citizenship, or responsible welfare (Bear and Knight 2017; Narotzky 2016). It makes sense to ask if 'alternative foods' initiatives constitute a source of responsible innovation and democratization of local and global food systems. Or whether, instead, they contribute to the conventionalization of organic, heritage, and fair foods as a form of niche-marketing, as well as to the consolidation and sedimentation of neoliberal forms of governance and subjectivities in contemporary

societies. Either way, it is in the midst of this dialectic dynamic that our role as cultural observers and social analysts is called upon, as we may be asked how we can make a difference.

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